No. 268 / JUNE 1995

THE NI
NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Heart and Soul

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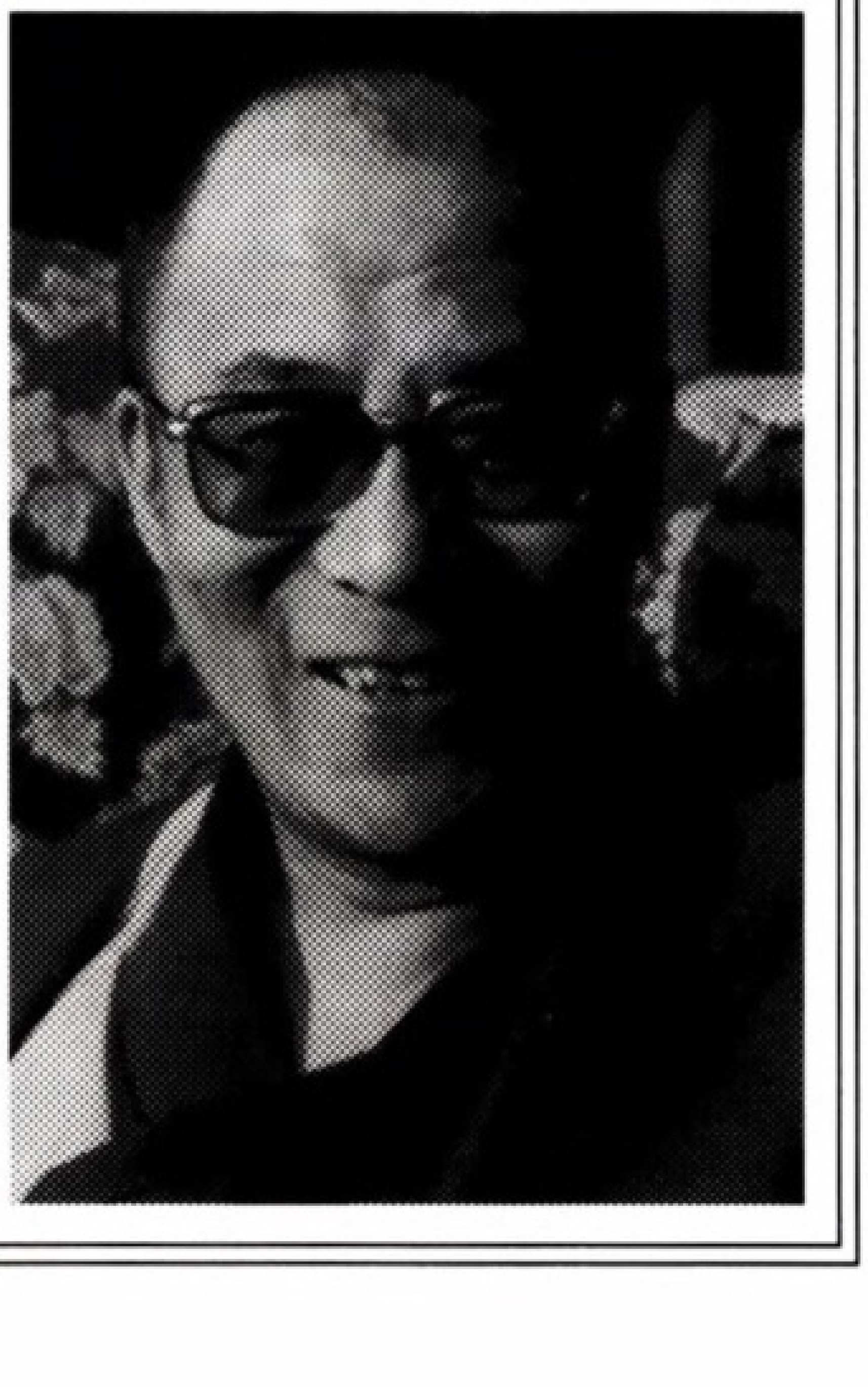

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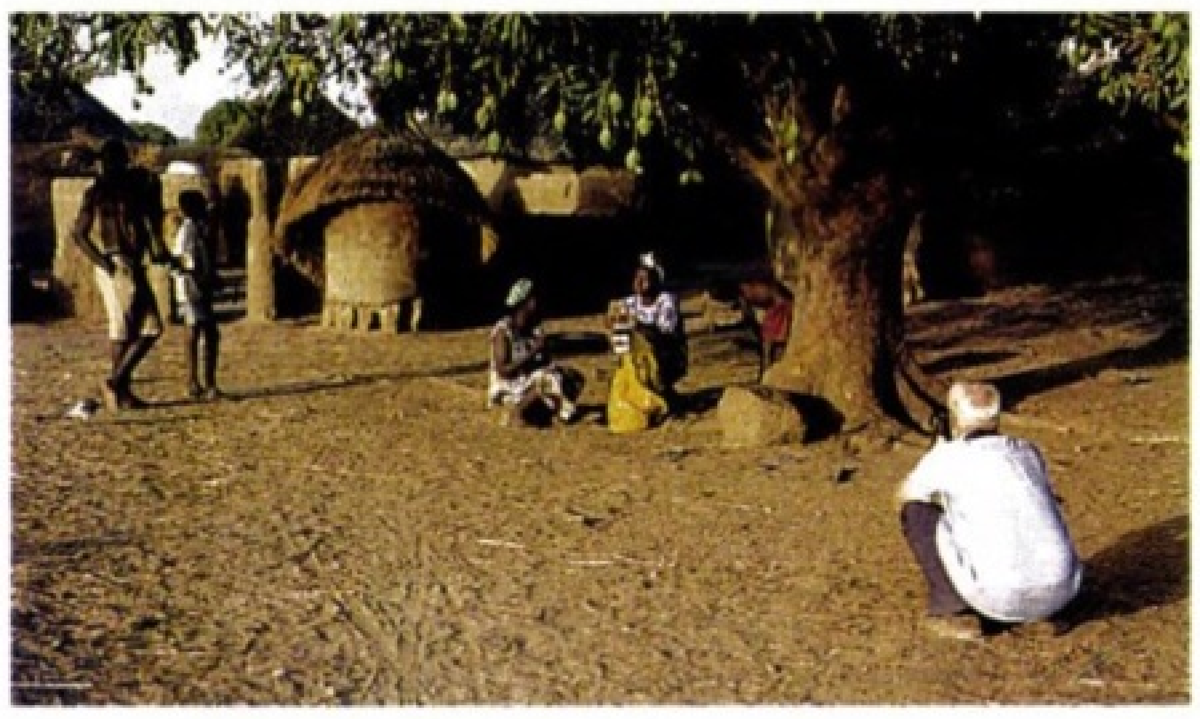
MAGAZINE DESIGNED BY **ALAN HUGHES**
FRONT COVER OF ZENABOU BAMBARA BY **CLAUDE SAUVAGEOT**



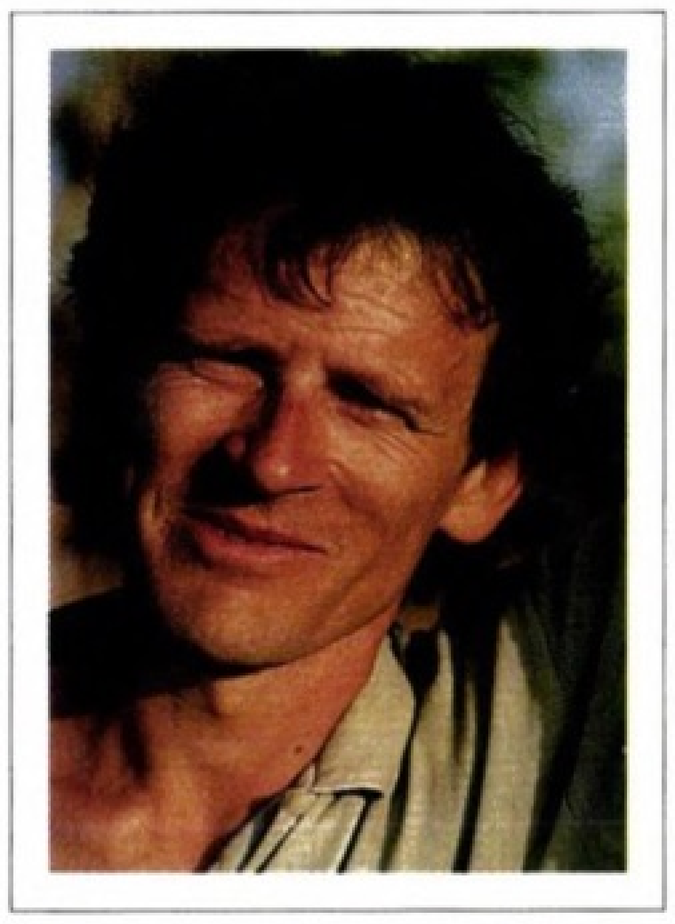
THIS MONTH'S **THEME**

An African Village

FROM THIS MONTH'S **EDITOR**

WRITING these few introductory notes is always the last part of the process of putting together a magazine. You might think I would be struggling to find something to add when I have already filled the whole issue with a report on my return to a village I first visited ten years ago. You would be wrong.

Doubtless that is partly because I like the sound of my own written voice too much. But it is also because there is so much you have to leave out of any report. There is, for example, the feel of being in this particular place, the scenes and sounds that colour every day. Scene one might be the hut in which I lived, more spacious than the normal village bedroom because it was built by a local woman who has made good in the capital. Scene two contains a wide and wonderful night sky such as we rarely encounter in a rich world blinded by neon: I saw behind the normal constellations dim multitudes of stars that I had never even suspected were there. The third scene is an aural one, full of the sounds of night: the extraordinarily anguished braying of donkeys in the small hours, the haunting call to prayer of a teenage girl, and the clicking of the colony of geckos nesting in the thatch above my head.



All but a few of the scenes of village life captured on camera in this issue were the work of an old friend of the **NI**, French photographer Claude Sauvageot. Normally we are able to illustrate our themes by choosing the most appropriate and striking images from photo libraries. But that was never going to be possible in an issue focused on a particular community far off the beaten track – and I would have found it impossible to do justice to the villagers in pictures as well as words. So I arranged for Claude to join me for the last few days of my stay (the photo on the bottom left of the page shows him taking the picture on Page 25).

It was a return to the village for Claude too since he co-directed the film we made there ten years ago. He has been a journalist – including war correspondence from Vietnam and the Congo – a photographer and film-maker throughout four decades. And in the few idle moments I listened with relish to stories from the fascinating life of a true internationalist.

He told me how he became a photographer. He was one of the first journalists into Nepal before it opened up to the world; on the way out overland he happened upon a terrible cholera epidemic in India and took a photo which was reproduced everywhere, striking a chord of sympathy all over the world. He said he realized then that a single photograph had got through to people in a way that a thousand of his articles could not have done.

This magazine has benefited from his photography consistently over the last two decades and probably our most memorable front-cover portraits have emerged from his camera. He has a rare ability to capture on film a moment, an expression, an individual gaze which has the ring of truth – rather than the feel of an image stolen from its subject. I can think of no photographer who could come closer to representing the 'Heart and Soul' of this issue's title.

Chris Brazier

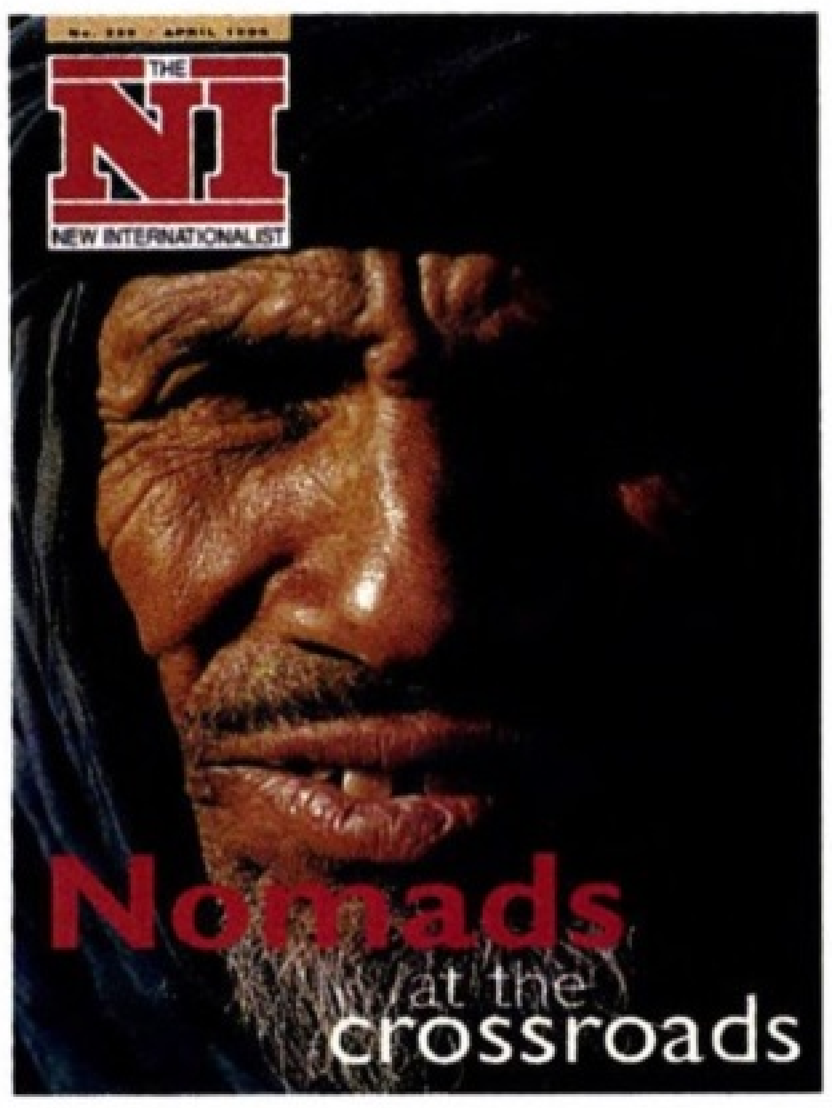
Chris Brazier
for the **New Internationalist** *Co-operative*

Letters

The New Internationalist welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

Criminal justice

The excellent issue on *Nomads* (**NI 266**) did not explore the repressive legislation against travellers in Britain under the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, which removes the obligation on local authorities to provide secure sites for travellers and criminalizes anyone found camping on unauthorized sites. The police have power to confiscate mobile dwellings and to imprison their owners. The Government suggests that travellers should purchase their own land, but in practice planning permission is usually denied.



The right to freedom of movement and residence is enshrined in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet the British Government is pursuing a kind of 'cultural cleansing', denying Gypsies and others the right to follow their cultural traditions. We can express our solidarity with travellers by working toward the repeal of this unjust law.

Annette White
Crewe, England

Statistics

In your 'Facts' spread *Ageing* (**NI 264**), you show that women live longer than men. This is true in all high- and middle-income countries, but (according to the *World Development Report 1993*) in low-income countries the differences are comparatively small. The glaring exceptions are Nepal and Bangladesh where women have shorter lives than men – 53 to 54 and 52 to 53 respectively. In three additional low-income countries, female and male life expectancy are equal: India (60), Pakistan (59) and Guinea (49).

You also ask 'Are children bad for you?' and conclude that 'The fewer children you have, the longer you are likely to live'. Far more important to the health of both child and mother is the amount of time between births. Your statistics jump from the number of children born to each woman and female life expectancy, but ignore advances in education and increased income levels, both of which lead to improved health. Providing contraceptives, effective counselling and trained health staff (all of them forms of better healthcare) will be the means of limiting the number of births.

Sarah Barber
Kompong Speu, Cambodia

People's democracy

The Somalia situation described by Mohamed Sahnoun in the issue on the ***United Nations*** (**NI 262**) has some parallels to the UN itself. Like Somalia, the option of empowering grassroots to develop local solutions to issues as they arise is too often ignored in favour of waiting for the crisis and dealing through the warlords, the Security Council 'Big Five'.

Meanwhile, the IMF, World Bank, the World Trade Organization and global currency traders have become the *de facto* world government.

What is lacking is democracy. The people are not represented in any of these fora. Nations are represented, especially rich ones. But when most conflicts are internal and many issues global, that's not enough. For 50 years the World Federalist Movement (current President Sir Peter Ustinov) has been working on democratizing world structures, including the UN.

Among many ideas for reform, they have a proposal for a consultative UN Parliamentary Assembly, whose representatives could start out being elected from among current national parliamentarians.

This would be an easy step to begin to represent world citizens. Before discarding the UN, as suggested by Richard Gott in your magazine, 'we, the peoples of the United Nations', should try to claim it and reform it.

If you are interested, contact the **World Federalist Movement, 777 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017 US;** or the **World Federalists of Canada, Suite 207, 145 Spruce Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 6P1.**

Elizabeth Snell
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

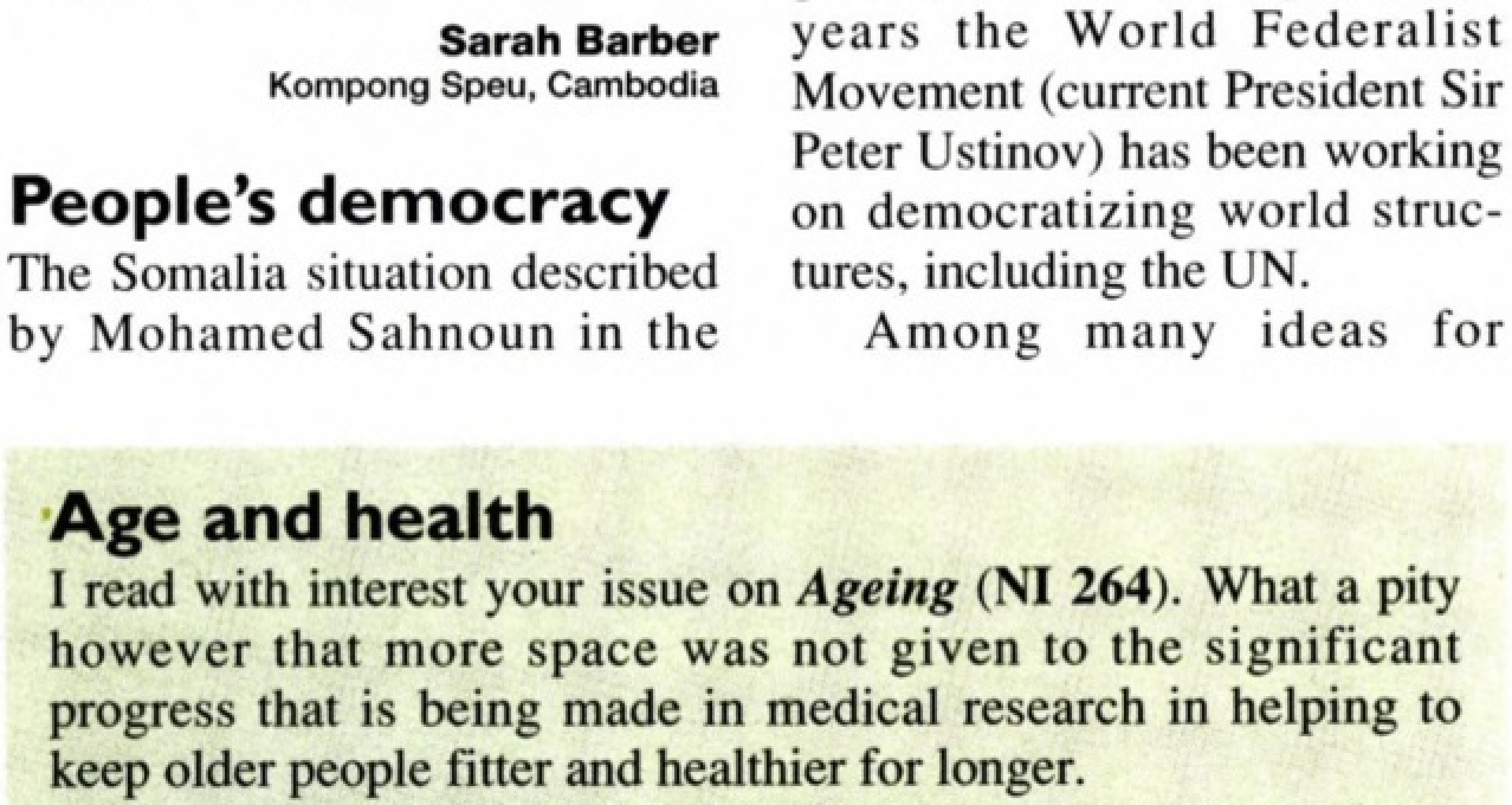
Age and health

I read with interest your issue on *Ageing* (**NI 264**). What a pity however that more space was not given to the significant progress that is being made in medical research in helping to keep older people fitter and healthier for longer.

Research into Ageing is a UK charity committed to the funding of such research. Scientists, medical practitioners and students are working in universities and hospitals on dementia, mobility, incontinence, impaired vision and the ageing process itself.

We would be delighted to send readers further information about our work. **Research into Ageing, Baird House, 15/17 St Cross St., London EC1N 8UN. Tel: (0)171 404 6878. Fax: (0)171 4040 6816.**

Rhonda Smith
Research into Ageing, London, England


It's great being this fit at a hundred and seven! The downside is being treated like a five year old when people discover my age.
Maybe when I'm six she'll stop calling me her ickle-wickle pussy-woosy
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Deaths and births

Whatever the failings of past UN Conferences (*United Nations*, **NI 262**), there is good reason to hope that last September's conference in Cairo on Population and Development will more than make up for them.

The decision to increase spending on women's 'reproductive health' from $5 billion to $17 billion annually by the year 2000 should eventually lead to a steady reduction in the number of maternal deaths, ie the number of women who die from pregnancy-related illnesses. It should also reduce the number of infant deaths – the number of children who die under the age of one.

The present figures for these categories are: maternal deaths – 500,000 a year, including some 150,000 from unsafe abortions; infant deaths – over eight million a year, of which one in five could be prevented if all births were spaced by an interval of at least two years. Has any other human 'calamity' ever produced figures to match these?

David Willey
Manchester, England

Language

In your *Country Profile* on Belarus (**NI 262**), the names of the major cities and towns on the map all seem to be in Russian. Since the sole state language at the moment seems to be Belorussian, shouldn't the names have been shown in that language?

It sounds priggish but when you consider the recent history of Belarus and the Soviet repression of the Belarussian culture, with the accompanying degradation of the language (such as changing the grammar to make it seem more like a Russian dialect and so discouraging its use in schools and universities) the choice of names is a more important issue than is usually realized.

Language is often used to identify and distinguish ethnic groups, who also use language as a focus for national aspirations, especially now with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

Jennifer Hor
Gordon, New South Wales, Australia

No go in Goa

Goa, in India, is becoming a popular tourist resort as foreign writers advertise its 'cheapness'. Tourism has brought many problems to Goa – but few benefits.

A recent letter to the Indian paper *The Herald* highlighted the case of an Indian railway traveller who was insulted by a British tourist.

Foreign-currency payments for hotels are believed to be banked abroad by hoteliers, thereby giving no benefit to the country. Prices have become inflated, for example there have been hikes in prices of over 30 per cent per annum over the last three years on air, train and bus travel and hotel rates. This makes costs prohibitive for locals.

In addition, Indian tourists are charged up to four times more for hotels than their foreign counterparts. The former, ironically, subsidize the latter.

Put very simply, because they are treated like royalty here, foreign tourists are demanding services and facilities out of proportion with what they have paid, and because local people are not aggressive, foreigners are getting away with all kinds of abuse and bad language.

Sharath Kumar Phule
Bombay, India

The views expressed on the letters page are not necessarily those of the New Internationalist.

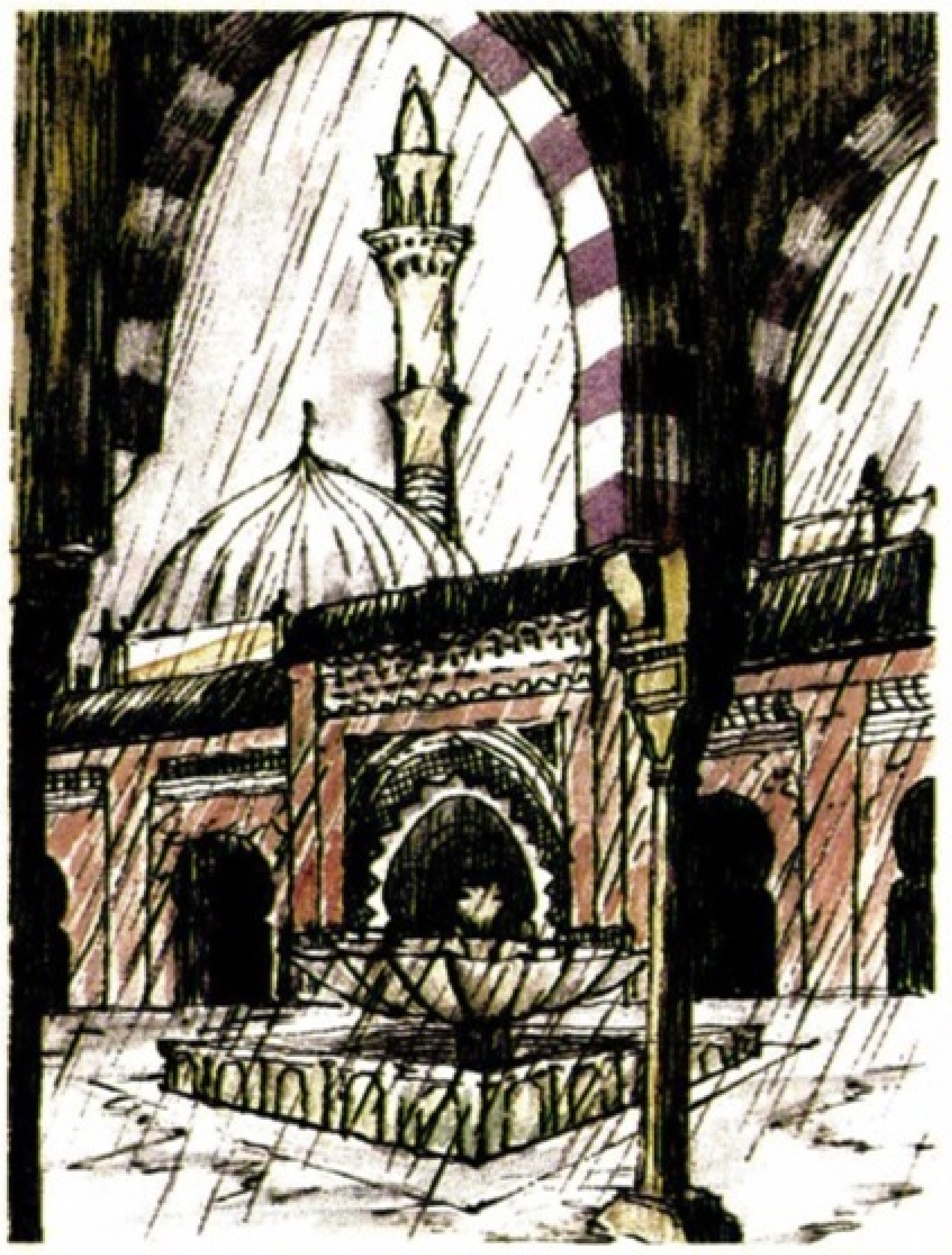
LETTER FROM **CRIMEA**

The kingdom of the khans

Olivia Ward reports from rain-sodden Crimea on despoiled palaces and forgotten fountains.

WATER, water everywhere. Down our necks, in our shoes, sliding into our handbags and turning our notebooks into washed-out hieroglyphic pulp. But here in the ravishing sixteenth-century village of Bakhchisarai, there was only rainwater. No water gushed through the famous fountain eulogized by the poet Alexander Pushkin the centrepiece of the Oriental-Italian folly built as a monument to the grandeur of the khans.

The local taps discharged a trickle of suspicious brownish liquid. Some merely coughed in a dry, exhausted way.



JUDY HAMMOND

It was a funny, sad and typical end to a Crimean trip. I had spent several days in the charmless capital of Simferopol and was ready to reward myself with a few hours of wallowing in historic beauty. Shaking off the shackles of an endless Russian winter I longed for the breathless burst of color and fragrance that signals the beginning of a Crimean summer.

But in the damp greyness the colors dropped out. I was looking at the dilapidation of the centuries unsoftened by warmth and sunshine.

I had no right, of course, to be disappointed. In a country where any tiny glimpse of beauty is a miracle, it is foolhardy to be depressed in the face of so much.

What I felt was more like frustration. Not for the fountain itself, which probably expired long ago, but for the dry rot of the vast former Soviet empire. Crimea, an area that with a little encouragement could compete with any European riviera, was a dumpheap of neglect.

The hotels, dusty and silent, lacked heat, water and tourists. The cafés that seemed so picturesque in their faded pastels were mostly shut. Even in the height of the summer season they have only a fraction of their usual customers as new high prices, soaring plane fares and cholera epidemics take their toll. Glimpsing the drawn faces of the people in the street put an end to any pleasurable strolling.

How did it come to this?

The easy answer was the break-up of the Soviet Union, shattering the economic system so brutally patched together over the decades. But looking at the palace of Bakhchisarai I knew it went back much further.

In the central legend of the town, the murderous Khan Krim-Girei fell in love with a woman who spurned him for his cruelty. Grieving night and day, he commissioned a Persian designer to create a stone that would weep through the centuries as an eternal tribute to his anguish. And so the fountain was born.

Monuments to loss and suffering are common throughout the former Soviet Union, albeit less aesthetic ones. But in centuries of bloodshed, violence, treachery and lust for power the weeping goes on and the causes are seldom considered.

Looking out at the rain-lashed courtyard where men returned triumphant from murdering and pillaging, and women were penned behind screens like stored goods, I could see one century's savagery blending into the next.

So many deaths, so much suffering, all for the benefit of a few rulers who were never seen by ordinary people. A process continuing today as in the time of the khans. The sadness I felt was being replaced by anger. Human values have passed this giant empire by. Without those values, no social contract could form.

In present-day Crimea the infrastructure has been falling apart while politicians battle for power. Once one of the most pampered parts of the former Soviet Union, it has slipped to the bottom. As in the past, a few people have profited while ordinary folk merely endure.

In my own mind, pity fought with revulsion. I was appalled by the casual acceptance of dirt, dilapidation and deprivation as conditions of life and the expectation that nothing will change – except for the worse.

Is there no way out of this, I wondered, rejecting the argument that a country in transition is always painful. The Slavic empire has been in transition for a thousand years and its preoccupation with power and conquest has scarcely changed.

I gazed again at the khan's palace. All over this old empire patches of beauty resist the onslaught of violence. Inexplicably the will to create persists. The fountain stood in front of me, long dried up but dripping in the rain. ■

Olivia Ward is bureau chief for the *Toronto Star* in Moscow.

Update

CANADA

In jeopardy

Global education programmes axed

Canada's unique national development-education system has been gutted as a result of severe federal government budget cuts. The $11 million slashed from the government aid agency CIDA's 'Public Participation Programme' is part of a planned $540 million cut to the country's foreign-aid budget which Jean Chrétien's Liberal Government announced in its February budget. The voluntary sector of CIDA, under which most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receive funding, was cut by $45 million.

Although NGOs across the country knew the cuts were coming, few were ready for their severity. Most expected a series of phased cuts over two or three years. Instead, for those groups doing global education work in Canada, the cuts were total and immediate. More than 100 organizations nationally were affected.

For people like Paddy Campbell of the Arusha Centre in Calgary, 'It's 25 years of community work down the drain.' CIDA's $120,000 grant to the Centre provided three-quarters of its budget, enough to hire eight part-time staff. Like dozens of similar community-based groups across the country the Arusha Centre is a busy hub for local interest in international issues. 'We've established solid relationships here with schools, arts groups, service clubs,' says Ms Campbell. 'And now it's all in jeopardy. It seems to me a tremendous waste.' The Arusha Centre will lay off six staff, some of whom have been there for more than ten years. Like fellow global education workers across the country they earn basic salaries, constantly battling to keep their underfunded groups afloat.

Government officials justify the targeting of public education programmes in terms of CIDA's aid mandate: their priority, they say, should be NGOs working overseas. However, global education activists believe the decision was motivated more by politics than foreign policy. Christine Smiley is Director of the Saskatchewan Council for International Co-operation, one of seven provincial co-ordinating councils that had their funding cut completely. 'To me the cuts are an attempt to silence those voices that have held the Government accountable on foreign-policy decisions.'

The Canadian system of government funding to global education inside the country was widely admired by NGOs abroad. Few other Western countries could match the extensive network of community-based groups working on aid issues that had developed over the last two decades. State support for public education on international issues began in the 1960s during the era of former Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. The original goal was to strengthen public support for government aid programmes. In fact global education advocates were rarely cheerleaders for government policies. Stuart Wulff of the South Pacific Peoples Foundation in Victoria says the cuts were not unexpected. 'CIDA has wanted to cut public participation funding for years. The feeling is that all these small decentralized groups are not efficient. They don't do enough public relations for the official aid programme. Bureaucrats argue the need for "professionalism" and "centralization" but it seems more to reflect a suspicion of community-oriented grassroots work.'

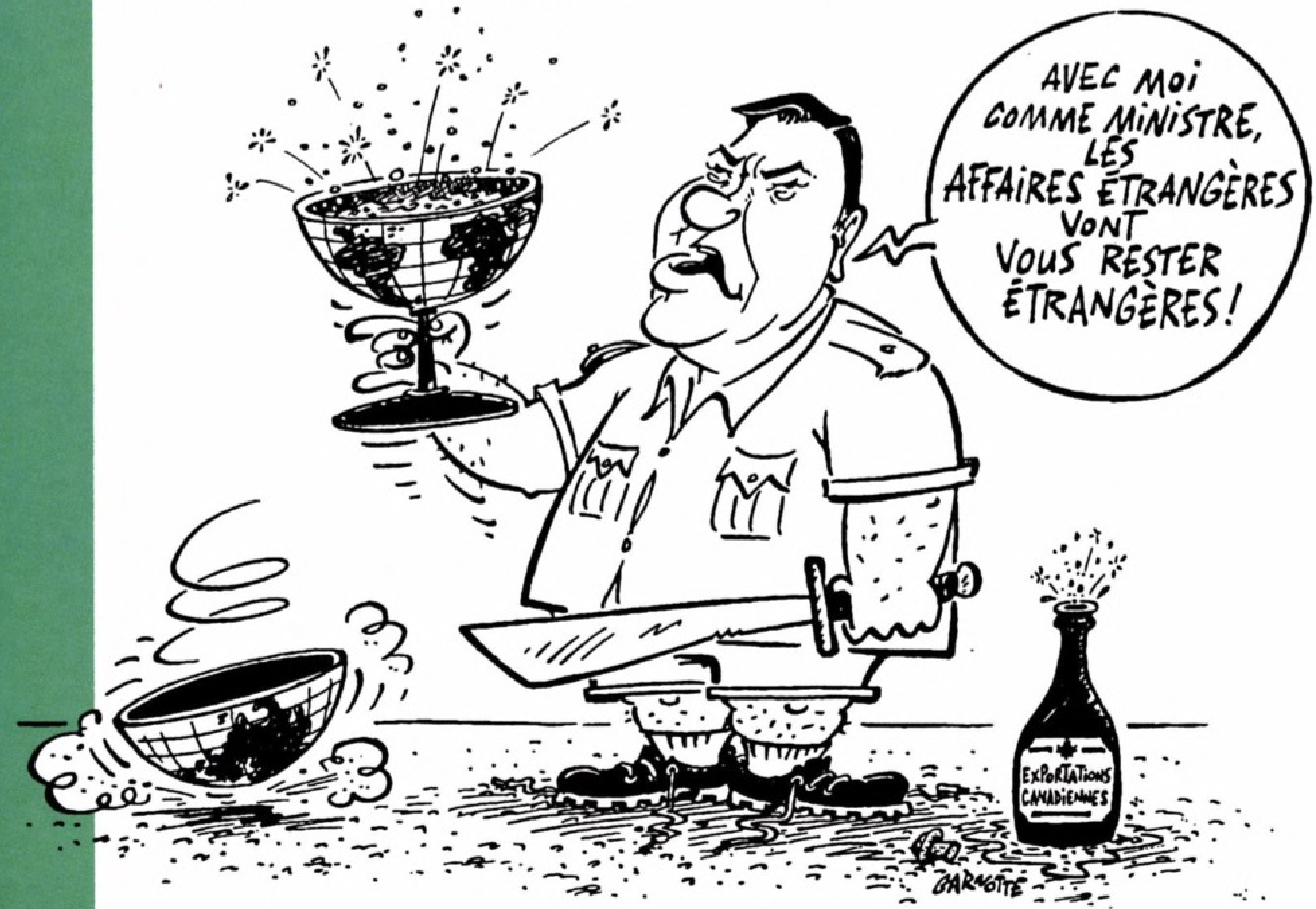
Most NGOs believe the impetus for the cuts came directly from Foreign Affairs Minister André Ouellet. The Minister is said to have taken personal offence at criticism directed at him by Quebec-based NGOs in the French-language press last autumn. The irony is that Ouellet made a point of congratulating NGOs for their contributions to cross-country hearings on foreign policy last year. 'The Minister says he believes in public participation to establish foreign policy,' says Dale Hildebrand of the Ontario Council for International Co-operation. 'But cutting off global education will only limit public debate.'

Although all parts of the Canadian aid programme were hit by the cuts, some sectors emerged relatively unscathed. CIDA Inc, the aid arm set up to boost Canadian exports to the Third World and stimulate the private sector in developing countries, received a mere ten per cent cut from $72 million to $64 million. Canada has high levels of 'tied aid' with over 60 cents of every aid dollar returning as a subsidy to Canadian business.

With these devastating cuts to global education there will be even less co-ordinated opposition to this business agenda. In addition, Canadian support to much-criticized financial bodies like the World Bank remains untouched. Nearly a fifth of Canada's official aid budget goes to these lending institutions. Current cuts will further reduce the country's aid budget to 0.31 per cent of GNP, a long way from the 0.70 per cent figure to which the Government is officially committed. ■

Wayne Ellwood

André Ouellet caricatured promising: 'With me as minister, foreign affairs will remain foreign to you!'


AVEC MOI COMME MINISTRE, LES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES VONT VOUS RESTER ÉTRANGÈRES!
EXPORTATIONS CANADIENNES
GARNOTTE

Chain gang

Inmates in leg irons were due to appear this spring along Alabama highways in the US. This is part of recently-elected Governor Fob James' plan to put more prisoners to work.

The Alabama Department of Corrections already has inmates who are considered low security risks picking up rubbish along highways. But Prison Commissioner Ron Jones has placed a $17,000 order for 500 sets of leg irons, so other prisoners can be put to work. Jones said the inmates will be chained leg to leg in groups of five, with eight feet of chain between them. 'We think the risk of escape will be almost nil.'

The Atlanta Journal, 19 February 1995

Free fall

The destruction of Cambodia's forests (reported in NI 242) continues unabated. The profits are being split between the Khmer Rouge, Thai and foreign companies and the Royal Government of Cambodia itself. Cambodia's forests have declined from 73 per cent of the land area to around 35 per cent today.

The outlawed Khmer Rouge guerrilla group, responsible for the killing of 1.5 million people, is doing a roaring trade in timber and gems with Thailand. However, the Thais maintain that the border between Cambodia and Thailand along which the logs are being transported has been closed since late 1994 when 22 Thai timber workers were murdered. Investigators from Global Witness, a group which focuses on situations where environmental exploitation funds human-rights abuses, described the closure as ineffective and cosmetic.

Just two sites controlled by the Khmer Rouge are capable of generating a million dollars a week. One of the companies dealing in this timber is Display Tech which sends it on to the US through Lumber World, a Florida-based importer.

Victim of the Khmer Rouge: this 1,300 year-old tree from Pailin.

GLOBAL WITNESS

The deforestaton has affected Cambodia's unique natural irrigation system, leading to floods, drought and the failure of the rice harvest. With the next harvest due only in December, many rural communities are facing the threat of famine.

Further information from Global Witness, PO Box 6042, London W2 3GH, England.. Tel: (44) 171 251 3900.

ECUADOR

Fight to the finish

Big bets on cockfights

Bloody boys' game: women may observe, but don't participate.

RACHEL BAYNES

A man died of a heart attack in a cockfight in Pelileo, a small town in the Ecuadorian highlands. He had lost a million *sucres* ($300). No more cock fights are held there. A million *sucres* is a small sum compared to the houses, cars and life savings that are sometimes bet on fighting cockerels in Ecuador. The monthly minimum wage is $33.

Cockfights, popular all over South America, are most prevalent in rural areas where families have the space to rear cockerels in their back yards. Championships between towns, regions and countries are held every year, like the South American Championships held in December.

It takes a year to raise a fighting cockerel. It is fed on vitamins and iron and made to do exercises. Once it has won over 10 fights it is worth up to $300.

Hector Valles has a friend who trains them. 'He holds the bird upside down and makes it bite the head of a chicken. He also makes cocks run and do sit-ups,' says Hector.

Standing around a table men of various ages and backgrounds display their cockerels. They share only their passion for the sport. Weighing and comparing the size and age of the cockerels is considered vital to the outcome. It can take hours. One owner swings his bird towards another cockerel's head to see if they show aggression. If they do, the owners must agree on how much to bet.

The cockerels are armed with pointed fishbone spurs for the fight. Plastic tape is wound around the bird's foot. The claws are trimmed. It flutters in discomfort. Wax is melted onto its claws to attach the spur. The bird held by Mario Vega, a 24-year-old local who is helping out, jumps from his arms. He grabs it tightly.

At the beginning of the fight the cocks are taunted with live chickens. One owner licks his bird's feathers, smoothing the ruffled ones down before sending it into battle.

'As soon as they send the cockerel to fight, it must stick the spur in the other's throat,' says Hector. Unemployed, he can only watch. 'When I am working again I will bet on the cockerels,' he says.

'Hit him', 'Kill him', 'Give it to him' shout the men drinking spirits. Traditionally it is the men who participate while female relatives observe. One cockerel gets badly wounded. The other has won. Its owner jumps up and down, hands in the air.

Mario shrugs his shoulders. 'I lost 100,000... Oh, that's nothing. Many bet one or two million,' he says. Mario swiftly carries the dying cockerel to the bathroom and cuts its throat. He adds: 'Well, they're going to eat it now. It's dead.' ■

Rachel Baynes

Update

CHINA

Unwilling teachers

High college fees restrict choice

China needs teachers – and young people are being recruited against their will. To refuse often means losing their chance of a college education. Only a small, wealthy minority can afford to pay college and university fees to study their subject of choice.

Liang, 18, has just finished middle school. She had hoped to study languages at university and become an interpreter. But the only form of higher education she was offered was teacher-training.

'I'm desperate,' she says. 'I don't have any talent for the job, let alone a vocation. When I imagine standing in front of a class, I sweat and panic.'

CHRISTINE HALL

Brief escape from teaching: Xiao and Li.

Li HuoYou, 23, studies at a college for teachers in Tonghua, in the Northeast. She wanted to become a bilingual secretary. Her sister and brother suffer from a disease of the brain and cannot earn. Li's parents could not afford the huge university fees. She was offered a state grant – on condition that she studied to become a teacher.

Li feels responsible for her parents and siblings, and will probably provide for them in the future. She will have to work for at least six years as a teacher before she is allowed to change jobs. And she will have to work wherever the state sends her. 'Probably in a small village, where nobody wants to go,' she fears. 'Most of us are sent to remote rural areas because the lack of teachers there is extreme.'

Only students whose parents have *guanxi* (connections) – and can afford to pay bribes – have access to the better-paid teaching jobs in the big cities.

Li's friend Xiao Wen Jun is also unwillingly attending the teacher's college. 'It is possible to escape the fate of being a teacher,' she says. 'But if you want to change to another work unit, you have to pay an enormous fine – at least 6,000 ($705) yuan.' Many teachers earn as little as 1,500 ($176) yuan per year, and Xiao doesn't think she can save enough money.

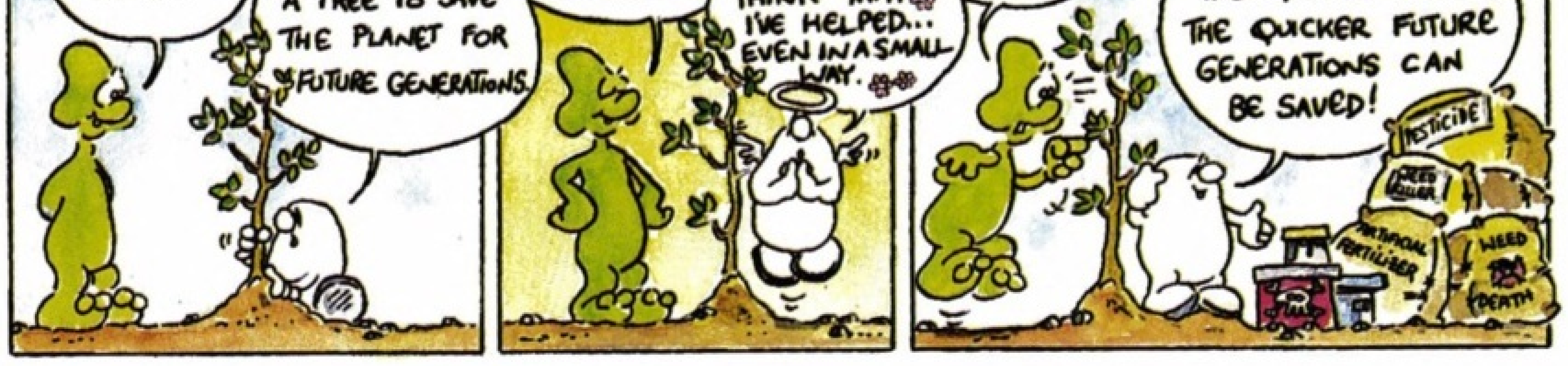
The situation looks more hopeful for Zhin Zue Lian. Her mother is manager of a department store and her father a graduate engineer.

'I will get qualifications for English teaching, and then I'll use my language skills elsewhere. My father has *guanxi* in the rich coastal cities in the south. He will find someone who owes him a favour and will get me a job as a translator.'

Xiao, whose parents are peasants, will have to come to terms with the unwanted profession: 'If I had the chance, I would like to become a journalist or an illustrator. But at least there is one advantage in being a teacher. There are suddenly so many unemployed people in China, who are terrifyingly poor. It will not happen to us.' ■

Christine Hall

Chlorophyll by Sacha



WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?
I'M PLANTING A TREE TO SAVE THE PLANET FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.
THAT'S A VERY NOBLE GESTURE. YOU SHOULD BE PROUD OF YOURSELF.
I LIKE TO THINK THAT I'VE HELPED... EVEN IN A SMALL WAY.
WHAT'S ALL THAT FOR?!?
I FIGURED THE QUICKER IT GROWS, THE QUICKER FUTURE GENERATIONS CAN BE SAVED!
PESTICIDE
ARTIFICIAL FERTILISER
WEED DEATH
Sacha

Big boss

A London curate is suing the Church of England for unfair dismissal. This follows an industrial tribunal which overruled the Church's claim that its clergy are not protected by the British Parliament's Employment Acts because they are employed by God and not the Church.

The Economist, Vol 334 No 7904

Mining trouble

The Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) has released a report on the killing, torture and disappearance of villagers living in a huge mining-concession area of West Papua controlled by US-based company Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold.

The villagers – members of the Amungme, Dani, and other West Papuan peoples – have been demonstrating in opposition to the expansion of the current copper and gold mine at Grasberg, one of the biggest in the world.

Now a British company, RTZ, is making a major investment – estimated at $1,700 million – in Freeport, which will finance expansion of the mining by up to 2.6 million hectares.

This February the Indonesian Government said that it would be removing (forcibly if necessary) 2,000 indigenous people from the concession area. The report states that 22 civilians and 15 alleged guerrillas have been shot by the Indonesian army, aided by Freeport's security personnel.

Others have been arbitrarily arrested, beaten, tortured and forced to flee into the jungle.

Further information in Australia from ACFOA. Tel: (61) 3 417 7505. Fax: (61) 3 416 2746.
Further information in Britain from Tapol. Tel: (44) 181 771 2904. Fax: (44) 181 653 0322.

What a gas!

At the United Nations global climate conference held in Berlin, the US – the world's biggest producer of carbon dioxide – refused to commit itself to any cut in emissions in the next century. This did not stop it from urging so-called developing countries to do more to cut down their emissions.

Its allies in this bizarre doublespeak were Australia, Canada, Japan and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The European Union advocated reduction commitments.

Meanwhile a bloc of 60 developing countries backed a proposal under which they would make no new commitments on cutting emissions of greenhouse gases while richer countries would be asked to make steep cuts.

The Guardian, 4 April 1995

Quote

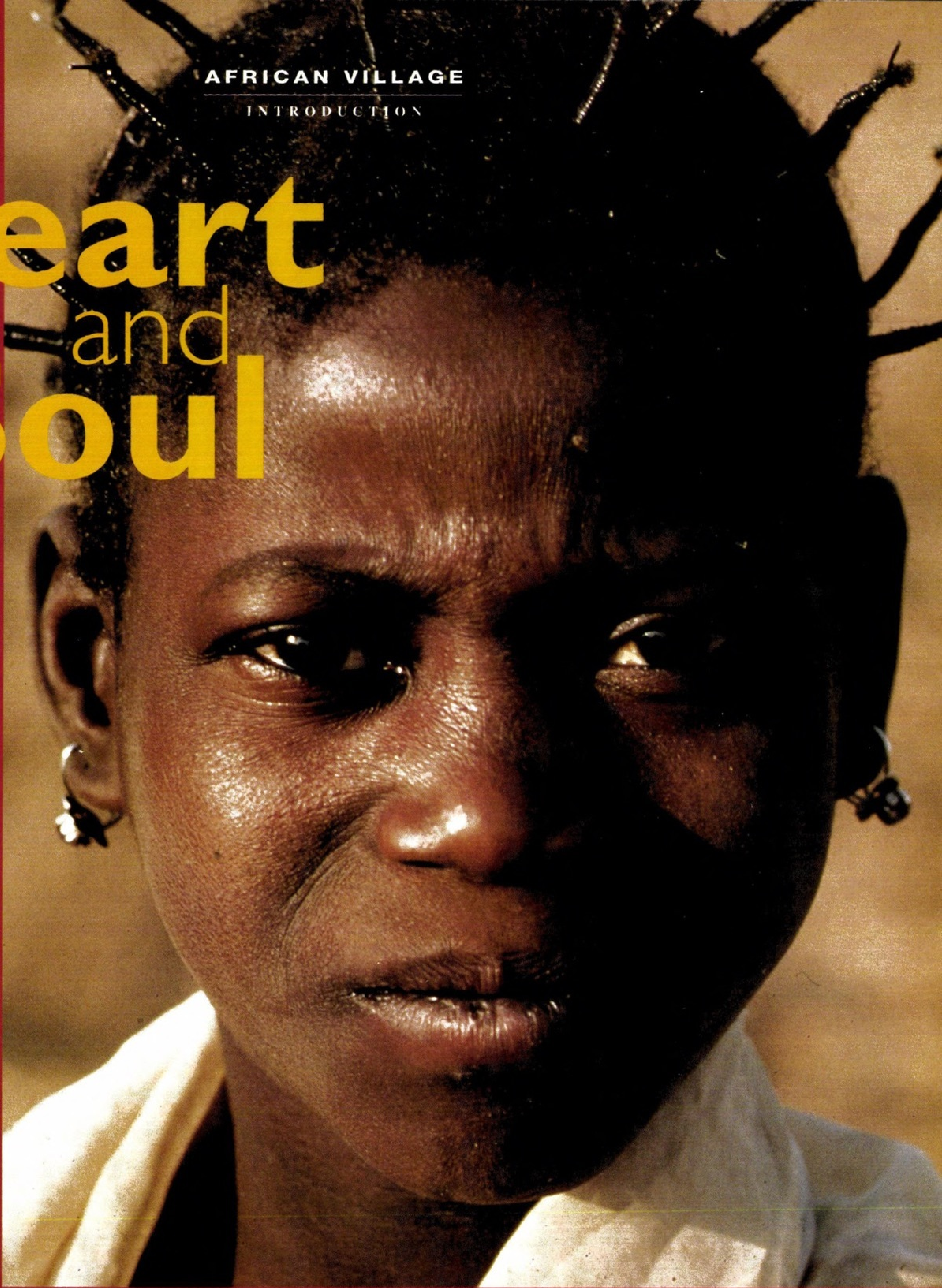
Travellers may tell what they have seen on their journey, but they cannot explain it all.

Ashanti saying.

AFRICAN VILLAGE

INTRODUCTION

Heart and Soul

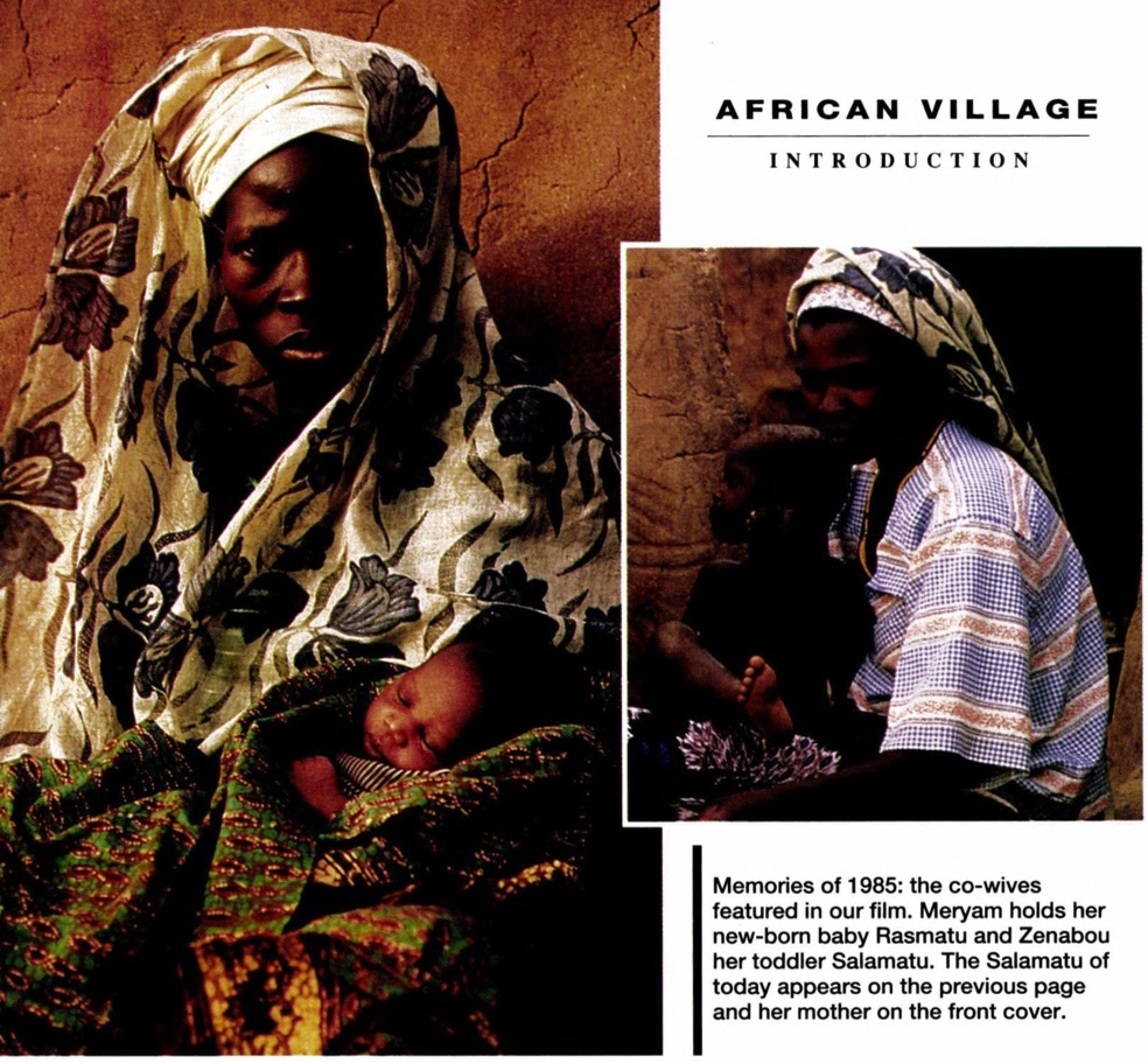


Chris Brazier returns after ten years to the African village which transformed his way of looking at the world.

WHAT words and ideas do you associate with Africa? War. Famine. Murderous tribalism. Population spiralling. A basket case. A permanently outstretched hand.

You can probably add your own impression of awfulness to this list. And after the tragedies in Somalia and Rwanda, not to mention the current events in Sierra Leone and Burundi, you can be forgiven for holding such images in your head. Prompted by news media which only dip into the continent when they can find events sufficiently terrible to top what we have seen before, people are quick to give up on Africa. It seems a hopeless, helpless case.

And yet how much of Africa do these images leave out? How many countries



Memories of 1985: the co-wives featured in our film. Meryam holds her new-born baby Rasmatu and Zenabou her toddler Salamatu. The Salamatu of today appears on the previous page and her mother on the front cover.

quietly busying themselves with the process of peaceful development are betrayed by the media focus on war and famine? How many millions of people leading their everyday lives with dignity and endeavour are dismissed and forgotten when we draw a red line through the whole continent?

The longer I live, the more I learn that what you see depends on your vantage-point and not on any absolute truth. Look at Africa from a rich country and you are likely to see that kaleidoscope of suffering and mayhem. Look at the African countryside from one of its capital cities and you are likely to see poverty, backwardness and ignorance. Look at rural Burkina Faso from a bus during the dry season and you will find nothing visually to contradict the fact that this is one of the poorest countries in the world. The earth is baked hard and looks dusty and lifeless. The villages and trees seem almost like intrusions into a landscape which looks as though it is already giving up the ghost, yielding to the relentless southward march of the once-distant Sahara.

But spend a few weeks in any one of those villages, as I have just done, and you soon see the world in a very different way. The red earth looks different when you remember the vibrant, raw life that screams out of it during the rains. Once you're in the village you not only know that life is possible here but also that it has its full quota of human drama. People come alive for you. 'African villagers' stop being statistics in a thesis, cyphers on a printed page. They have real bodies, real feelings – lives that have a beginning and a middle, not just some horribly painful end. Their loving and their laughing, their dancing and their dreaming, their pain and their joy are not that different from our own.

It was ten years ago, in June 1985, when I learned this lesson. My first-ever journalistic assignment in Africa sent me in search of a woman farmer whose story we could tell in the **NI** film that was eventually broadcast as *Man-Made Famine*. I'd chosen Burkina Faso because it was in the middle of a revolution – and for once it was a revolution in more than just rhetoric. Its young President, Thomas Sankara, had a unique honesty and vision which set him apart from almost any other African leader and which could have served as an alternative blueprint for development (see Page 26). I have never been in a country where I have felt such a kinship with what the Government was trying to do.

Eventually the film crew came out and we selected a village called Sabtenga, in the south-east of the country, and a woman called Zenabou Bambara. But I found myself peripheral to the filming process and instead took to wandering through the village in the company of a young woman who volunteered to act as my interpreter, Mariama Gamené. Those days of walking and talking utterly changed the way I viewed the world.

I was staggered by how much I had in common with the people I met. Here I was in one of the poorest villages in one of the poorest countries in the world, a village in which people did not have animals to help them work the land, let alone machines. They simply had to scrape at the bitter earth with their backs bent. Here I was in a place on the far side of a cultural as well as economic gulf – a society in which animism was the dominant religion, in which polygamy was the norm and in which girls almost without exception suffered genital mutilation. And yet across this widest of all gulfs I made a connection with people, a connection of common humanity transcending all borders, all difficulties and differences.

That I should have been surprised by such an instinctive and natural connection says a lot about the package of prejudices we carry with us. The goal of this issue is to leave you with the same feeling of connection. Of course there is a world of difference between reading about someone and actually sitting down to chat with them, between being told about your common kinship and sensing it for yourself. But, short of sending you all to Sabtenga for a few weeks, that's what we're going to have to do.

I could have chosen any village in Africa and found human stories, vivid personalities and lessons about how development works out on the ground. But I'm not sure I would have had the gall to turn up unannounced in a village I'd never visited before and expect it to reveal its innermost secrets. After all, anthropologists spend years living with people and still manage to get some things wrong.

No, I chose Sabtenga because I had a head start there – I felt I'd got halfway to understanding the way it worked before and would be able to build on that. But above all I wanted to return to see what had happened to the community and individual people within it like Zenabou and Mariama.

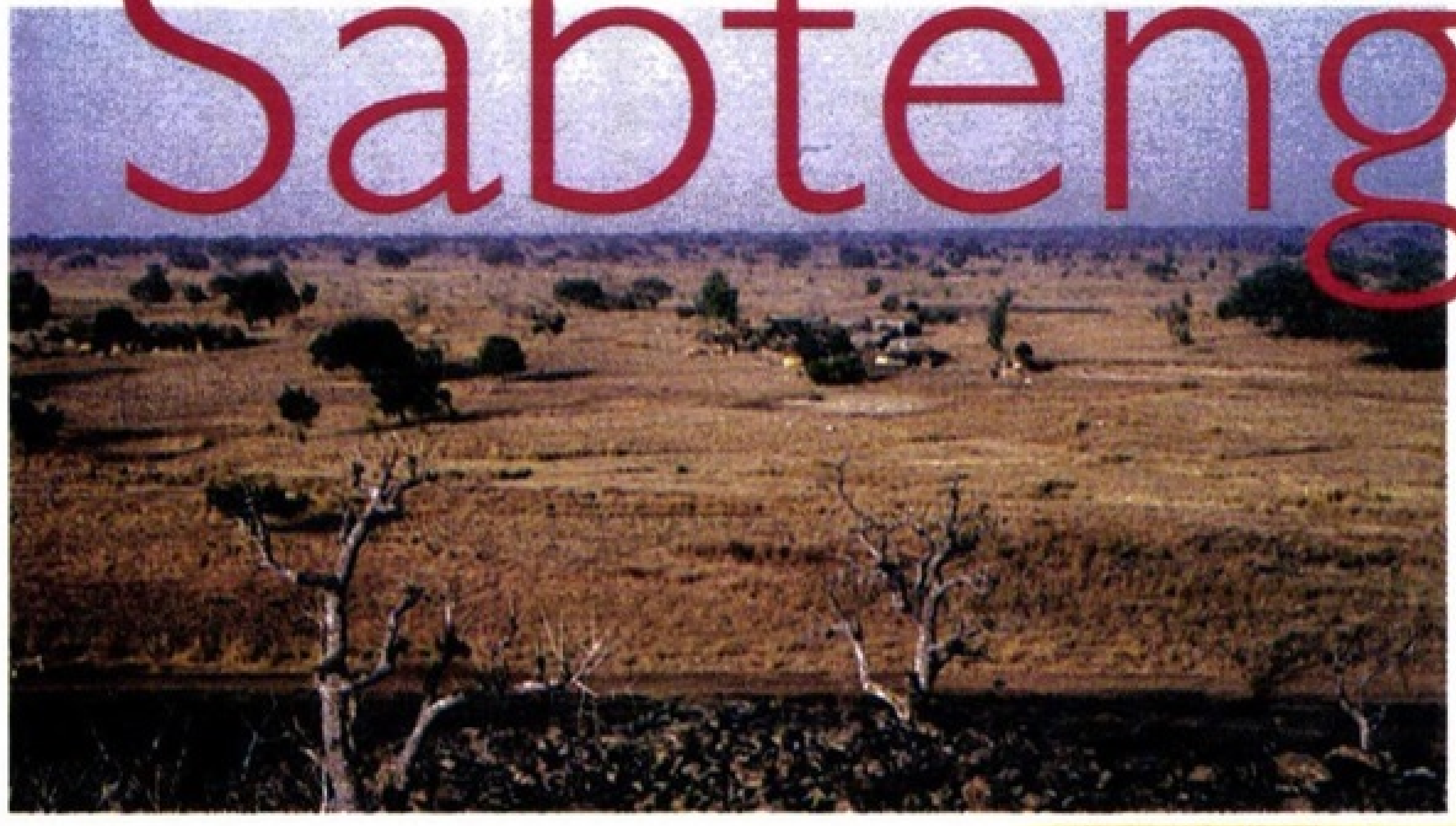
It's all too rare for journalists to return to the stories they have once told or exploited – people are milked for their angle and then dropped back into limbo as if they have only lived for the moment in which the media blesses them with its magnanimous eye. That's inevitably true even of development journalists who are looking to tell the human stories behind the big statistics about the poor world.

For years I've had the idea of returning to the village. This year the tenth anniversary of my first visit seemed to tip the project over the brink into plausibility. I sent word to the village that I was coming, giving at least a bit of warning. But I had no idea what had happened in the intervening years – my early attempts at correspondence had soon petered out.

What would I find? Would the village be utterly unchanged, barely rippled by the raging tides of world events? Or would the revolution that I witnessed in action there, that inspired me so, have survived the murder of its leader? Would Mariama have managed to maintain her courageous lone stand against genital mutilation? Would the earth look even more degraded and the trees have completely disappeared? Above all, would the people I remembered still be alive? ■

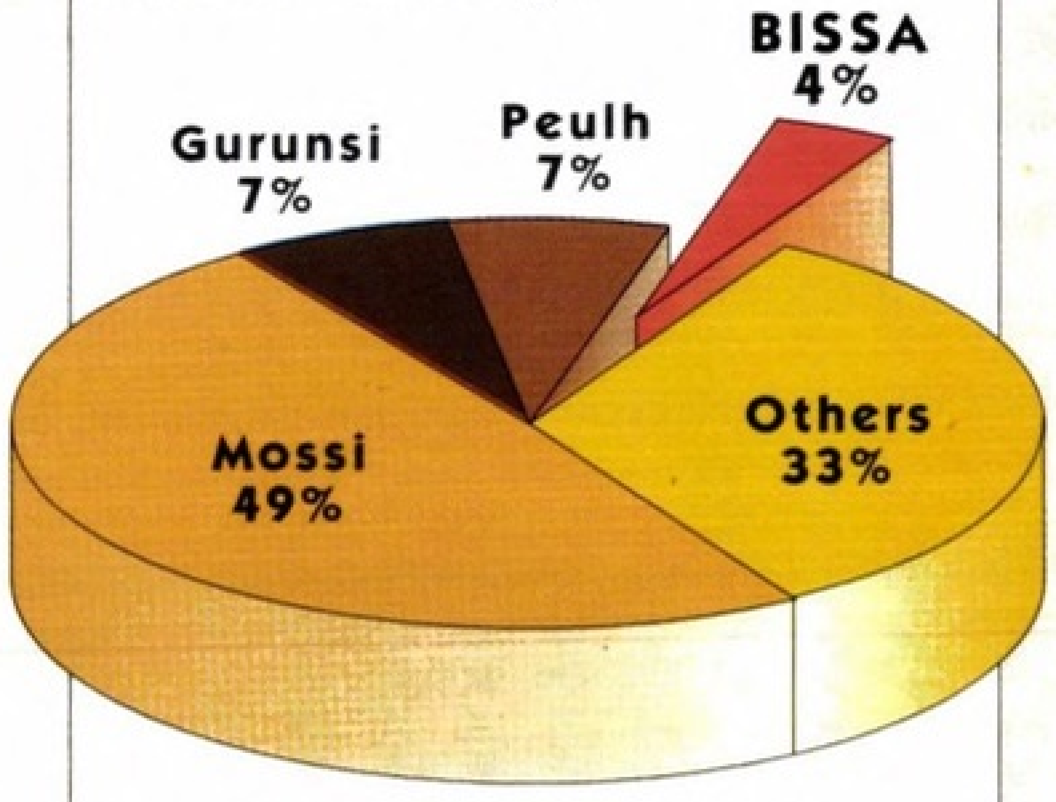
MAP

Sabtenga

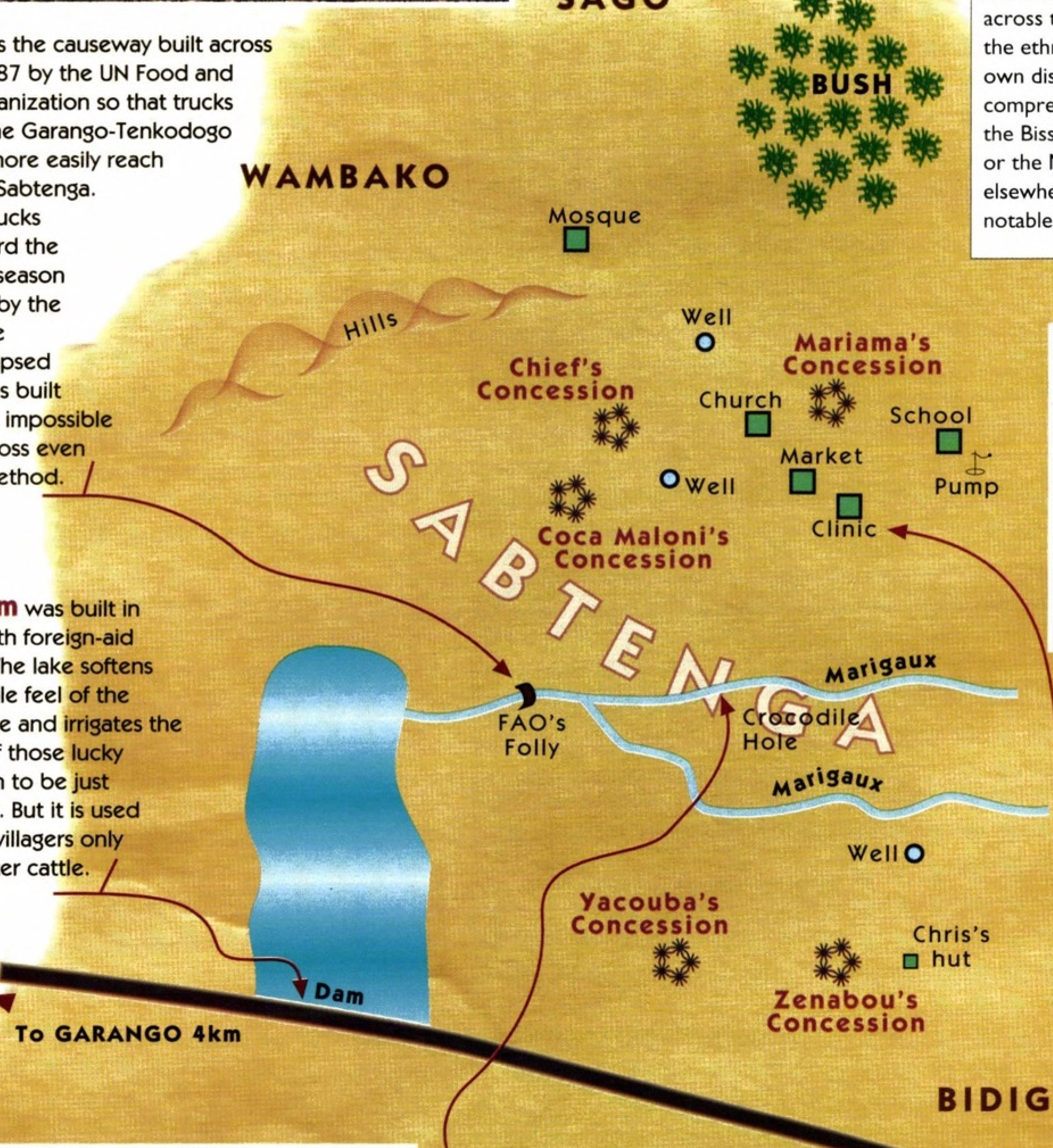


FAO's Folly is the causeway built across the river in 1987 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization so that trucks coming from the Garango-Tenkodogo road could more easily reach grain stores in Sabtenga. Before that trucks managed to ford the river in the dry season on stones laid by the villagers. But the causeway collapsed soon after it was built and it has been impossible for trucks to cross even by the old method.

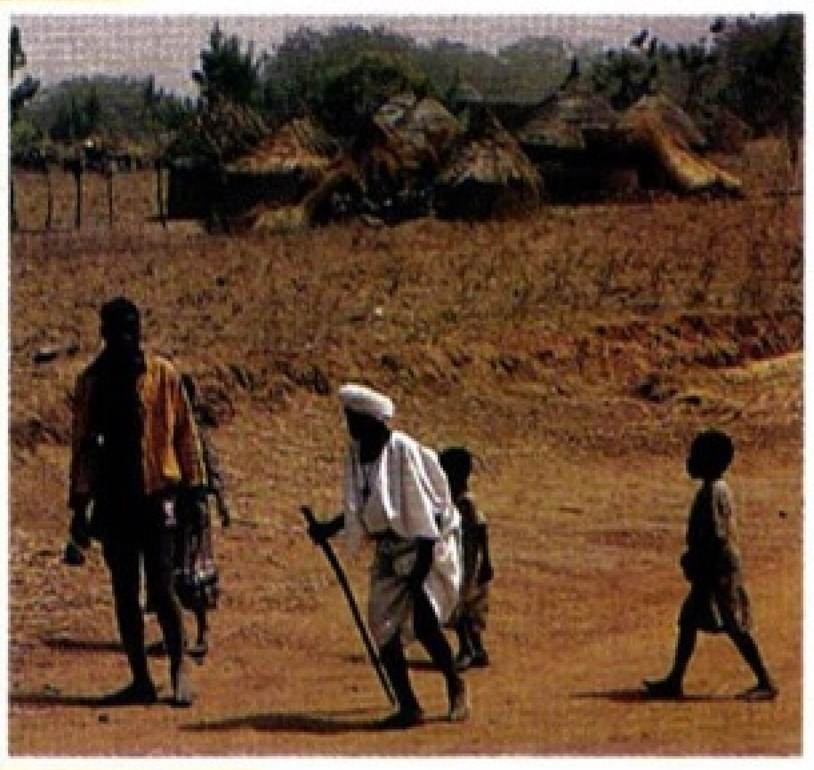
Burkina Faso's Ethnic Make-up



The inhabitants of Sabtenga are from the Bissa people, who are also found across the border in Ghana. Each of the ethnic groups in Burkina has its own distinct language which is not comprehensible by other groups. So the Bissa need to learn either French or the Mossi language, Moré, to work elsewhere. But ethnic tension is notable by its complete absence.


To MALINGA NAGSORÉ 10km
SAGO
BUSH
WAMBAKO
Mosque
Hills
Well
Mariama's Concession
Chief's Concession
Church
School
Market
Well
Pump
Clinic
Coca Maloni's Concession
SABTENGA
Marigaux
FAO's Folly
Crocodile Hole
Marigaux
Well
Yacouba's Concession
Chris's hut
Zenabou's Concession
Dam
To GARANGO 4km
BIDIGA
To TENKODOGO 10km

The dam was built in 1960 with foreign-aid money. The lake softens the whole feel of the landscape and irrigates the fields of those lucky enough to be just below it. But it is used by most villagers only to water cattle.



Coca Maloni struggling back to her home (see page 15).

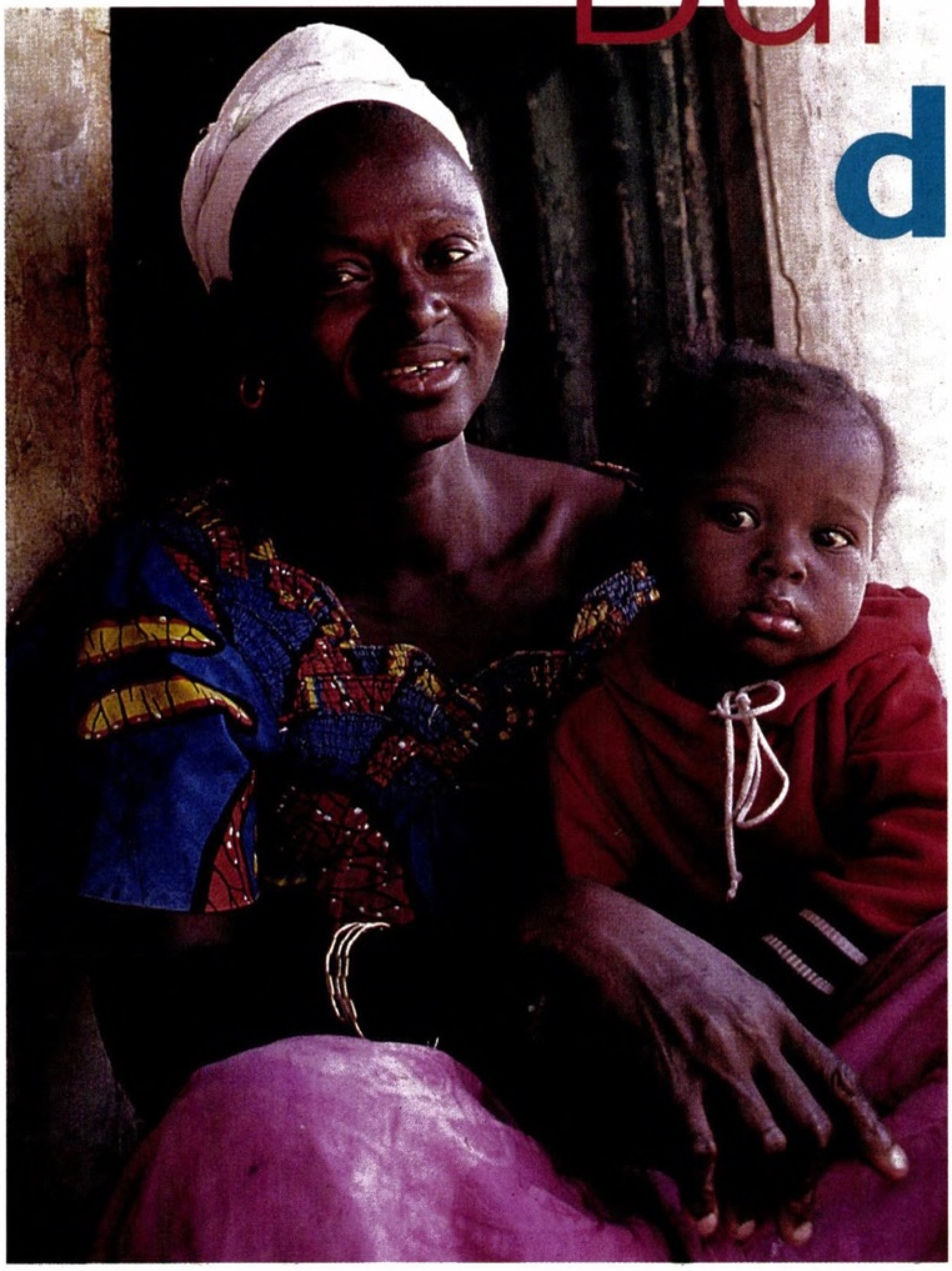
TOP TWO PHOTOS: CHRIS BRAZIER

The clinic covers a much wider region than this – as far as Malinga Nagsoré in the north and the Peulh village two kilometres further along the road to Tenkodogo, a catchment area containing 10,000 people.

Crocodiles come out of their holes in the **marigaux** (a French African word for rivers that only flow in the rainy season) at night and during the rains. Hyenas roamed wild in and around the village only 25 years ago and lions were seen regularly 50 years ago. Local legend has it that an old lion still hangs out on top of the rocky hills overlooking Sabtenga.

There are not enough fish in the small lake to provide a major source of food for the village but Ousmane Moné (shown in the photo) regularly tries to supplement his diet and income in this way.

Burden of dreams



Mariama with her seventh child, two-year-old Rasinatu, something of an indulged favourite with both mother and father.

An emotional arrival... Three children too many... One of two wives in a second-best marriage... Houses changing shape – is that progress or a problem?

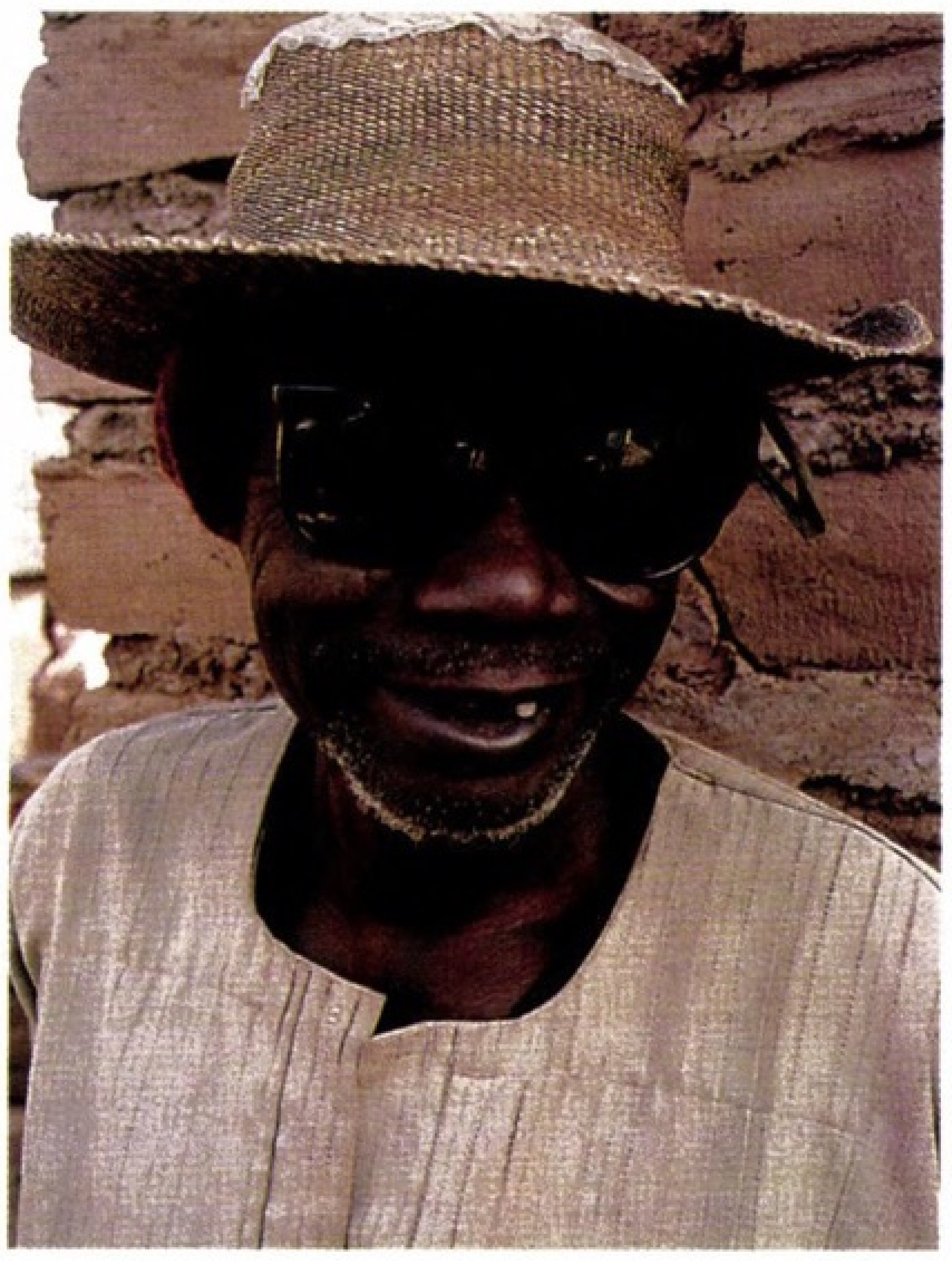
A TEENAGER is leading me through the two kilometres of open country that separate the outlying district of Bidiga, where I am to live, from the centre of Sabtenga. I need his guidance. I thought I would remember my way but I haven't a clue which path to take. To Westerners the word 'village' conveys a clump of houses clustered around a road or central square. That doesn't begin to conjure up Sabtenga, whose 5,000 inhabitants sprawl over a vast area, each living in complex warrens of huts, yards and passageways called *concessions*. These concessions can house anything between 10 and 100 people – they can be a bit like a village in themselves and are separated from the neighbouring concession by anything from twenty to hundreds of metres of rough, baked earth.

Identifying Mariama's concession would have been just as impossible, though I recognize the huge tree at its entrance as I pass. This is dressed not only in leaves but in wrinkled skin – hundreds of bats hang from its upper branches and burst into alarming life every evening the moment the sun takes its leave of the horizon.

To tell the truth I am a bit nervous – I am approaching the key moment in this whole adventure, since it was Mariama's insights that opened the door for me on the life of the village ten years ago. She is pleased to see me and gives me an enthusiastic kiss but after that I think neither of us knows quite what to do. She looks a touch more careworn – but nowhere near as much as I do (a soldier at the airport looked at the fresh-faced photo in my passport and then back at me about five times in half-feigned incredulity).

We sit down in her courtyard and exchange the most basic news while she pummels at some millet for the evening meal – the everyday staple in the village is a thick, sticky millet porridge or *tô*, chunks of which you dip into a thin vegetable sauce. Her younger children pull at and clamour round her as she works.

Ah yes, those younger children. When I was here ten years ago Mariama told me clearly that she didn't want any more than the four children she then had. It was a matter of some urgency for her since the traditional period of grace for a mother after the birth of a child was coming to an end – she knew that Issa, her husband, would soon be resuming his visits to her hut. The familiar sickness and swelling would follow as inevitably as night follows day. She knew they had pills to stop pregnancy in the capital but what use was that here? I remember feeling desperate to think of some way out for her but without contraception her only hope was to persuade Issa that another child would not be a good idea.



Issa takes a break from building work on another new house in the concession.

The inevitable happened and she now has seven children. She is unusually lucky that all her babies have survived – her co-wife Alia, for example, lost four of her seven children. But there is a flipside to this luck: Mariama is an active, intelligent woman who feels besieged by her smaller children and who is desperately conscious of the burden of feeding so many.

'*I* wanted to stop at four,' she tells me the next day when we are a bit more used to each other again. 'But it wasn't possible. First Issa didn't want to stop. And second there were no pills in the village.' It seems contraceptives only became available a year ago – and even now they are used by only 12 women.

Mariama's story seems to scotch one myth about population: the one which says that people without contraceptive technology will find some natural method of their own. True, the Bissa had evolved a method of birth spacing through the husband's sexual abstinence for two years after the birth. But in this case a woman who was absolutely convinced that she didn't want more children was unable to prevent their coming. 'It's children that drain a woman and exhaust her,' she says.

But for Issa the drain on his wife counted less than the potential help in the fields later on – the traditional peasant argument in favour of more children. Now, ten years and three children later, he is finally convinced that another mouth to feed would be bad news. So perhaps Mariama's tired body will get some rest. But it's a sad, sad thought that she's been subjected to so much.

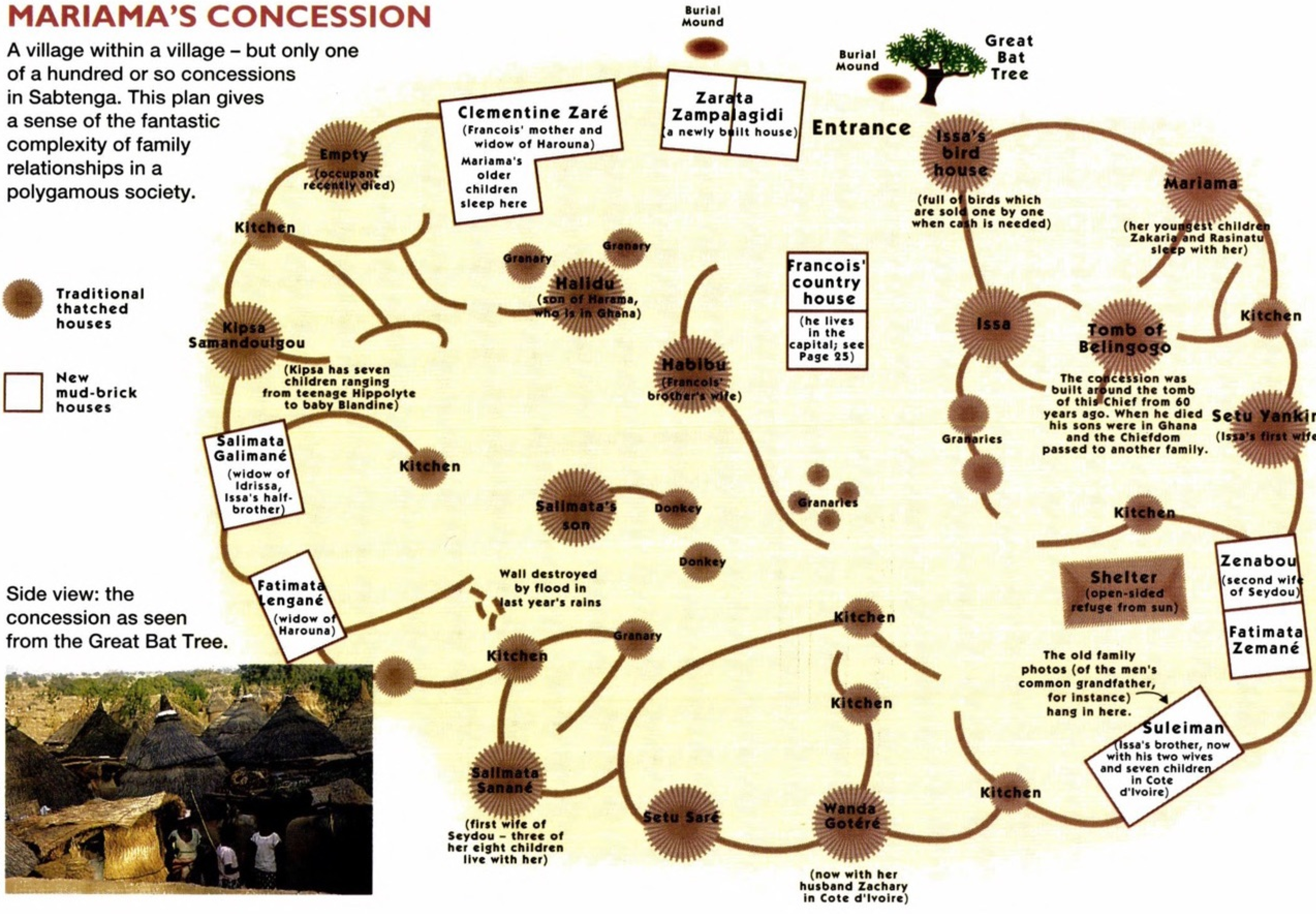
I think Issa always knew he was getting an unusual package when he took Mariama as his second wife. She says he understood from the start, even as a man who had to live and die by farming his own land, that Mariama would not work in the fields – that she never had and never would. What he was getting instead was a woman of ability and outspokenness – qualities other men would not necessarily have valued in a wife and which won her election to the village's Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, established by Sankara to challenge the conservative power of rural chiefs.

When I first met her she was 28: tall and slim, still young despite her four children and with a face so infused with life that it looked all the time as though she were poised on the brink of laughter. All the same, she made no bones about telling me how hard she found life in the village, which she contrasted with her childhood memories of rain and plenty in the nearby town of Garango.

Her father had served as a soldier with the French in Vietnam and gained financial security as a result. And he had marked that in the traditional fashion by taking four

MARIAMA'S CONCESSION

A village within a village – but only one of a hundred or so concessions in Sabtenga. This plan gives a sense of the fantastic complexity of family relationships in a polygamous society.



● Traditional thatched houses
☐ New mud-brick houses
Burial Mound
Burial Mound
Great Bat Tree
Clementine Zaré (Francois' mother and widow of Harouna)
Mariama's older children sleep here
Zarata Zampalagidi (a newly built house)
Entrance
Empty (occupant recently died)
Kitchen
Granary
Granary
Halidu (son of Harama, who is in Ghana)
Issa's bird house (full of birds which are sold one by one when cash is needed)
Mariama (her youngest children Zakaria and Rasinatu sleep with her)
Francois' country house (he lives in the capital; see Page 25)
Kipsa Samandoulgou (Kipsa has seven children ranging from teenage Hippolyte to baby Blandine)
Habibu (Francois' brother's wife)
Issa
Tomb of Belingogo
The concession was built around the tomb of this Chief from 60 years ago. When he died his sons were in Ghana and the Chiefdom passed to another family.
Kitchen
Granaries
Setu Yankiné (Issa's first wife)
Salimata Galimané (widow of Idrissa, Issa's half-brother)
Kitchen
Salimata's son
Donkey
Granaries
Kitchen
Donkey
Zenabou (second wife of Seydou)
Shelter (open-sided refuge from sun)
Fatimata Lengané (widow of Harouna)
Wall destroyed by flood in last year's rains
Kitchen
Granary
Kitchen
Fatimata Zemané
The old family photos (of the men's common grandfather, for instance) hang in here.
Kitchen
Suleiman (Issa's brother, now with his two wives and seven children in Cote d'Ivoire)
Salimata Sanané (first wife of Seydou – three of her eight children live with her)
Setu Saré
Wanda Gotéré (now with her husband Zachary in Cote d'Ivoire)
Kitchen

Side view: the concession as seen from the Great Bat Tree.

CHRIS BRAZIER

wives, so there had always been plenty of brothers and sisters around to play with. He was also a devout Muslim – and this turned out to have a profound impact on the course of his daughter's life.

By the time Mariama was 17, the traditional age for a Bissa woman to marry, she had fallen in love with a young gendarme in the town. But it was a doomed affair. The fact that he was from a Catholic family might not have presented an insuperable obstacle – Catholics and Muslims live happily cheek by jowl in the village and, provided the woman (never the man) is prepared to adapt, marriages between the communities are not uncommon. But the gendarme was an atheist and Mariama's father absolutely ruled out the idea of a son-in-law who did not pray. She did not even think of standing out against her father's judgement: the marriage she preferred was simply not to be.

... awareness of your own poverty becomes more painful when someone else's relative prosperity is staring you in the face

Instead she had no alternative but to marry another, older suitor who already had one wife. It could have been much worse. Issa was a quiet man of 30 whom she knew would be steady and never beat her. Besides, there was at first the excitement of cosmopolitan Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire. But after two years Issa's father died and they had to return to Sabtenga so he could become head of the family. It is still a source of regret that they did not have time to build up more savings to underpin their lives as subsistence farmers.

This notion of material comfort as something that comes from Côte d'Ivoire or Ghana is ubiquitous in the village. The community lives by subsistence agriculture – people grow enough millet to see them through the year during the rainy season that stretches from May until the harvest in September. Surpluses can be sold to raise cash but surpluses are rare. Instead young men still follow the model set when the French used what is now Burkina Faso as a pool of forced labour for the resource-rich coastal areas. They set out in search of work on the plantations or in the cities. Some never come back. Some go just during the dry season when no useful work can be done in the fields. Some build up a nest-egg to the point where they can return and set themselves up with a wife (or three).

It's odd witnessing the effect of such cash infusions over a long period. If I were visiting Sabtenga for the first time now I would probably just be struck by the hardship of subsistence life. Yet having known the village ten years ago I can't help but be struck by signs of material progress that I hadn't really expected to find.

Ten years ago, for example, I was desperately aware of people's backbreaking labour in the fields. They walked kilometres to reach their fields then bent double to hack at the bitter earth with their *dabas* (small hoes). 'Can't they get any help at all with this work?' I remember thinking, being more used to Asia, where oxen pulling ploughs are the norm.

To my surprise, the ox and plough have now arrived in Sabtenga. By no means all households have them – and Issa and Mariama are among those who cannot yet afford them. But many households do have oxen, as well as donkey carts in which to bring the harvest back from the fields – a significant advance for women, who used to carry it in vast bundles on their heads. Those who have managed to buy an ox can also cultivate a much larger area, which is especially important when the fertility of the soil is declining. The other family I knew best ten years ago was that of Zenabou and Adama, about whom we made our film. They now have no less than 12 oxen and in material terms are pulling away from their neighbours.

As this suggests, a gap between 'rich' and 'poor' is beginning to open up within the village – and as in all societies, the awareness of your own poverty becomes more painful when someone else's relative prosperity is staring you in the face.

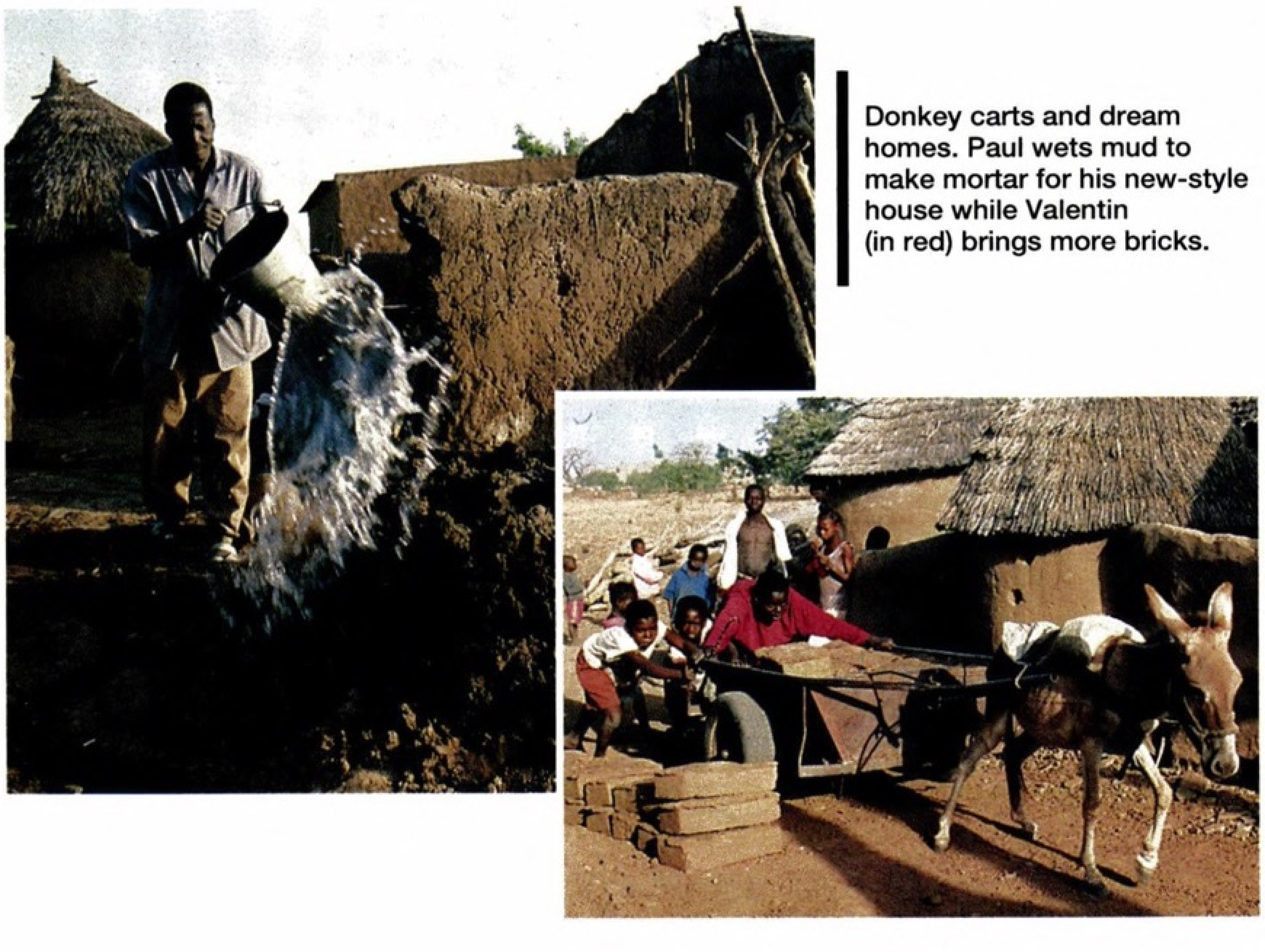
Even the houses now testify to this. Ten years ago people lived as their foreparents had since time immemorial – in concessions composed of small round huts with conical thatched roofs. I certainly had no thought that this traditional housing was likely to change. Yet it has.

They are still building with mud, which is softened with well-water then poured into a mould to form a brick that hardens in the sun for a day. When they have enough bricks they use mud as mortar and build up a rectangular house which is roofed with sheets of corrugated iron.

I am used to decrying corrugated iron as a terrible sign of Westernization in a tropical clime – it is an expensive, industrially produced item which invites rather than repels the heat. But you have to listen to what the villagers say. They know full well that corrugated iron makes their houses hotter. But it will not leak during the rains as even the best thatch is liable to – and it will last for fifteen years instead of just two. Even more to the point, the high-quality straw traditionally used for roofing is becoming impossible to find in the bush.

If I come back in another ten years I may well find only donkeys in thatched huts. That will certainly be so if the villagers have any choice in the matter, since only the lack of money to pay for corrugated iron stands in their way. As a result the village will look altogether less picturesque to Western eyes. But people will probably be happier in homes which are more spacious, more durable and, sad to say, more free from the connotation of poverty now attached to the traditional houses.

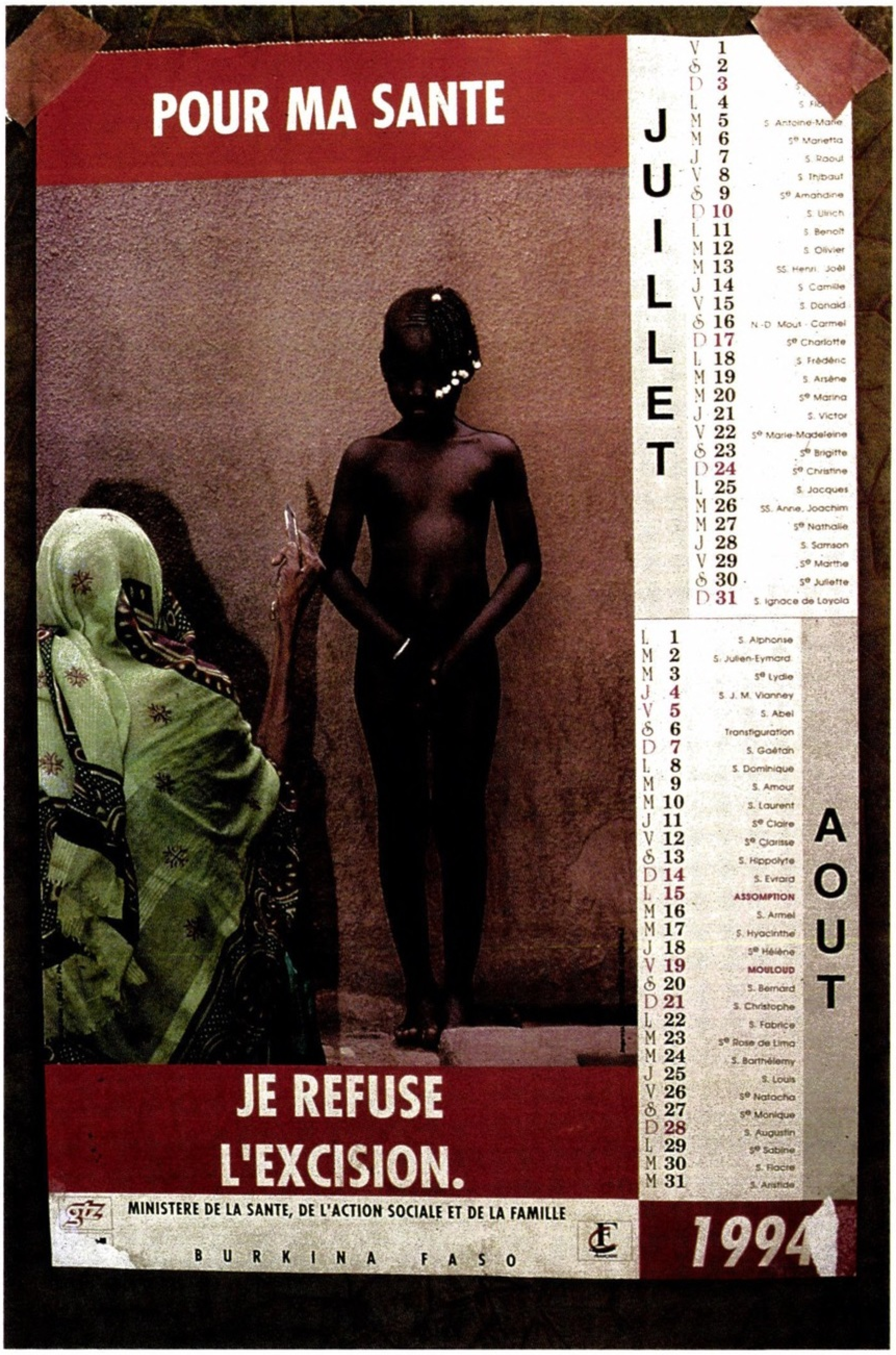
Mariama is certainly in no doubt. A box topped with corrugated iron might seem to us a questionable improvement. But to her it would be a palace. She has vivid, longing dreams about living in it – literally her dream home. ■



Donkey carts and dream homes. Paul wets mud to make mortar for his new-style house while Valentin (in red) brings more bricks.

The razor's end

Have the old women had their way?... The Chief's revelation... National campaigns snowball... The hands that made the cut...



'For my health I refuse excision.' This product of a strong government campaign is one of many impressive health-education posters to be found on the walls of Sabtenga's clinic.

Of all the issues that perturbed me as I returned to the village this time, the one that worried me most of all was female genital mutilation – the traditional practice in some African societies of removing a girl's clitoris in preparation for womanhood and marriage. I was also well aware that this is a subject with a rare power to fascinate Western readers by its sheer horror. In a magazine built on the idea of connecting people across the cultural and economic Grand Canyon how was I to handle this most alienating of issues?

There is something of a voyeuristic, negative element to this preoccupation of 'enlightened', anti-sexist Westerners with clitoral excision. Somehow, debarred from all the other reactionary notions about African savagery, our morbid fascination and 'politically correct' moral outrage becomes all the more extreme. Some campaigners have reacted to this by launching a defence of the practice as a part of indigenous African tradition over which Westernization is riding roughshod.

Let's try to dispense with morbid fascination but also agree that excision itself is indefensible – it not only deprives women of sexual pleasure but causes them all kinds of pain and health complications. Girls regularly end up disabled and even dead as a result of the 'operation' or infections caused by it.

But my worries, as I returned to the village, were much more concrete. Mariama was the first woman in the village to stand up against the traditional practice and refused to have her daughters mutilated. Ten years ago her two daughters Memnatu and Aseta were still unharmed but I was by

One of the saved. Aseta's fourth journey to the pump this afternoon ends in a shimmering curtain of water. The scar by her nose tells a tale (see box opposite).

no means confident that they would have remained so. There have been plenty of documented cases where the older women of a village (who are generally responsible for the act) have taken matters into their own hands and used a razor on a girl. In 1993, for example, Ouagadougou teacher Isabelle Ilboudo sent her five-year-old daughter Vanessa on holiday to her family village – only for Vanessa to be sent back to the capital excised by outraged aunts.

Even if the old women had not intervened, I wondered if Mariama's eldest daughter Memnatu, who would now be of marriageable age, might have been forced to capitulate to the tradition in order to find a marriage partner. In some parts of Burkina Faso excision actually doesn't happen until the wedding day itself, when the bride is cut in the bush, honoured in a ceremony and then returns to her husband to consummate the marriage.

So it is with great relief that I find neither Memnatu nor her sister Aseta have been mutilated. But it isn't until I interview the traditional Chief of the village that I discover what a revolution has occurred here these past ten years. I ask the Chief about his attitude to excision fully expecting him, as official guardian of tradition in the community, to be gung-ho for it, as everyone was in 1985.

Instead he gives a remarkable answer. Up until seven years ago, he says, he thought this a good thing. But after hearing government campaigns on the radio and listening to the case made by local women like Mariama, he came round to thinking it an unhealthy practice which causes women pain and danger in childbirth. Since then he has not only stopped it happening to his own youngest daughters but has also held two public meetings to campaign against it.

I can hardly believe my ears. I naturally came to the village in hope of finding success stories that might lighten people's general gloom at the African condition. But never in my wildest dreams did I expect such a transformation as this. As Mariama and I retreat from the Chief's concession I ask her if this is really true.

'Yes, it's true,' she says. 'Excision doesn't happen here any more.'

But that's wonderful, I burble, telling her how proud of herself she should be. And so she should – as the first woman to stand against the tide she can take a great deal of credit for the change.

Of course the Chief could have been just telling me what I wanted to hear – as he certainly did on another issue (see Page 16). But over my weeks in the village the revolution in attitude is confirmed. There seems to be nothing taboo about the subject: everyone agrees excision no longer happens. When I ask a lively women's meeting about the issue, for example, one woman pipes up 'If I tried to do it to my daughter now she'd have me put in prison!'

The countries where female genital mutilation is most prevalent

	Estimated % of girls affected	Estimated number affected (millions)
Somalia	98%	29.2
Djibouti	98%	0.2
Ethiopia	90%	22.5
Sierra Leone	90%	2.0
Eritrea	90%	1.5
Sudan	89%	11.8
Mali	75%	3.8
Burkina Faso	70%	3.4

Source: The Progress of Nations 1994, UNICEF.

As this indicates the change has not come about entirely through grassroots pressure from below. It is also a response to national education campaigns which have their roots in Sankara's Revolution. Sankara was the first of the country's leaders to take a stand against genital mutilation, calling the campaign 'a just and noble struggle' which aimed to emancipate women. In 1985, just before my first visit to the country, activists called for the abolition of excision during National Women's Week. This led directly to a national seminar in 1988 and ultimately to the production of a TV documentary with the World Health Organization called *Ma fille ne sera pas excisée* (My daughter will not be excised). The National Anti-Excision Committee was launched formally in 1990 by President Compaoré, and this runs regular awareness meetings as well as producing TV and radio broadcasts.

The unanimity with which the practice is now condemned in the village is quite staggering – I almost want to find someone who disagrees to prove I am not the victim of some huge whitewash. I find it in the person of the old Imam, Umaru Tanaguda, who doggedly sticks to his position that neither woman nor man can be a Muslim unless they have been circumcised – it is for him a question of purification. But even the most devout members of his community have now moved beyond him and accepted that there is no connection between Islamic faith and female excision – the practice was never advocated in the Qur'an. Adama, for example, the husband in our film ten years ago, is himself a *marabou*, a kind of lay preacher, who teaches Islamic law in his own home. Yet he too has abandoned the practice so that Rasmatu, who was born while I was here ten years ago, has escaped mutilation.

If there are still excisions going on in the village then they happen clandestinely. In the nearby town, Garango, I meet a nurse who says that he does still encounter excision – but in only about ten per cent of girls. This is still too high, of course, but it is a pretty remarkable shift from the near 100 per cent of ten years ago. And perhaps the most telling thing of all is that the excisions are now happening in secret. Ten years ago the shame and stigma was on those who still had what was seen as 'the female penis' and who were thus not real women. The reversal is extraordinary.

I am determined to meet one of the old women who used to carry out the operation to see if she has accepted the new orthodoxy. Coca Maloni, who is profiled below, performed excisions up until three years ago – a chilling thought given the state of the enfeebled, shaking hands which held the razor blade so recently. Even more terrifyingly, she says she had always believed that the clitoris was a worm that would burrow back inside the girl and do internal damage if it were not cut out. But three years ago she'd been persuaded that it was a bad and unnecessary practice – she mentions official radio campaigns as a key factor in convincing her and the other old women that they should stop. We can lament the ignorance that governed her practice of excision over all those years – but we should also appreciate the humility with which she has accepted, at the very end of her life, that she has been mistaken.

Almost everyone I talk to in the village is against excision on health grounds rather than on those of sexual pleasure – and this is undoubtedly the right tack to have won the support of traditional religious and community leaders. But the sexual benefits for all concerned will also be enormous. Sexual intercourse is often very painful for excised women not just because of scarred tissue but also because the removal of the clitoris (and often the labia minora too) means that the vagina is not lubricated by arousal. Some women do report experiencing pleasure when the scar of their clitoris is touched but in practice the experience of sex is inevitably one of endurance for women. This is by no means an advantage for the man – though excision probably originated out of the need for husbands to be sure of their wives' fidelity. Burkinabè men who experience sex with an unexcised woman soon realize that her pleasure and active participation gives them much more enjoyment as well.

The idea that sexual pleasure will now be possible for all these girls and young women who would have been denied it before is fantastic. It shouldn't be underestimated in itself as a force that will propel this generation of women towards greater equality with their menfolk. Nothing changes in Africa? Don't you believe it! ■

New life for old: Coca Maloni

I was keen to see one particular *yaaba*, or wise old woman, because I remembered a story Mariama had told me 10 years before – how her third child, Aseta, had fallen into a raging fever that threatened to carry her away and she had taken her to see a yaaba called Coca Maloni. She said a great bird of evil omen had passed over Aseta and that the wickedness had to be let out. She made a small but deep cut beneath the right eye with a razor blade, just on the cheekbone. And within a week Aseta was playing again – though she still bears the scar today.

Coincidence? Probably. But it helped give Coca a rare power in my imagination even before I met her – no-one who is familiar with Africa would dismiss its traditional medicine out of hand. I conjured her up as a powerful conservative force in the village, a symbol of the old ways. Instead she turns out to be the most memorable of all the people I interview in the village precisely because she has been so prepared to change.

She is very old now – extraordinarily old in a country with an average life expectancy of 48. As she shambles painfully towards the concession from her once-weekly excursion beyond its confines, she cuts an extraordinary figure, bent almost literally double over her stick. Like many of the older people in the village she can't be sure of her exact age since she has never had a birth record. But the depth and ubiquity of the wrinkles all over her fascinating face bear out her sense that she is about 90 years old. She moved to Sabtenga to marry about 70 years ago but has been a widow for 40 years. Terrifyingly, of her nine babies only one survived – though that son did his best to make up for it by taking eight wives himself.

I ask her first one of my standard questions to the older people of the village – does she feel life is better now than in the old days? Given that the old days for Coca were those of the French colonizers, this is no contest. It is a magnificent tribute to the virtues of French colonialism that what everyone recalls of it is the system of forced labour which they imposed on the country, dragooning the able-bodied men into effective slave labour.

'But the other big improvement,' she says, ' is the clothes.' This is not the first time I have encountered this slightly strange answer – I spoke to an old man who thought that the main value of modern living was the superior quality and durability of modern trouser or pants material. But Coca is casting her mind much farther back to when, in her childhood, the people of the area wore nothing at all but a square of cloth around the genitals. I ask why she thinks it is so much better for people to wear clothes. Is it because they protect you from the sun? Or is it for reasons of modesty? 'No, it's not for that,' she answered. 'It's just that it's so much warmer. In my childhood we had to keep a fire going in the house all the time.'

In the latter part of her life Coca has, like other old women in the village, been a resource for both midwifery and medicine. The way she talks about it the *yaabas* form a kind of community of their own – Coca delivered babies but seemed to share the role almost interchangeably with other women. She would guess that she delivered nine out of every ten babies safely. In normal circumstances there was no religious or magical element to a delivery – only if the mother was having problems would she resort to seeking God's help by sacrificing a chicken.

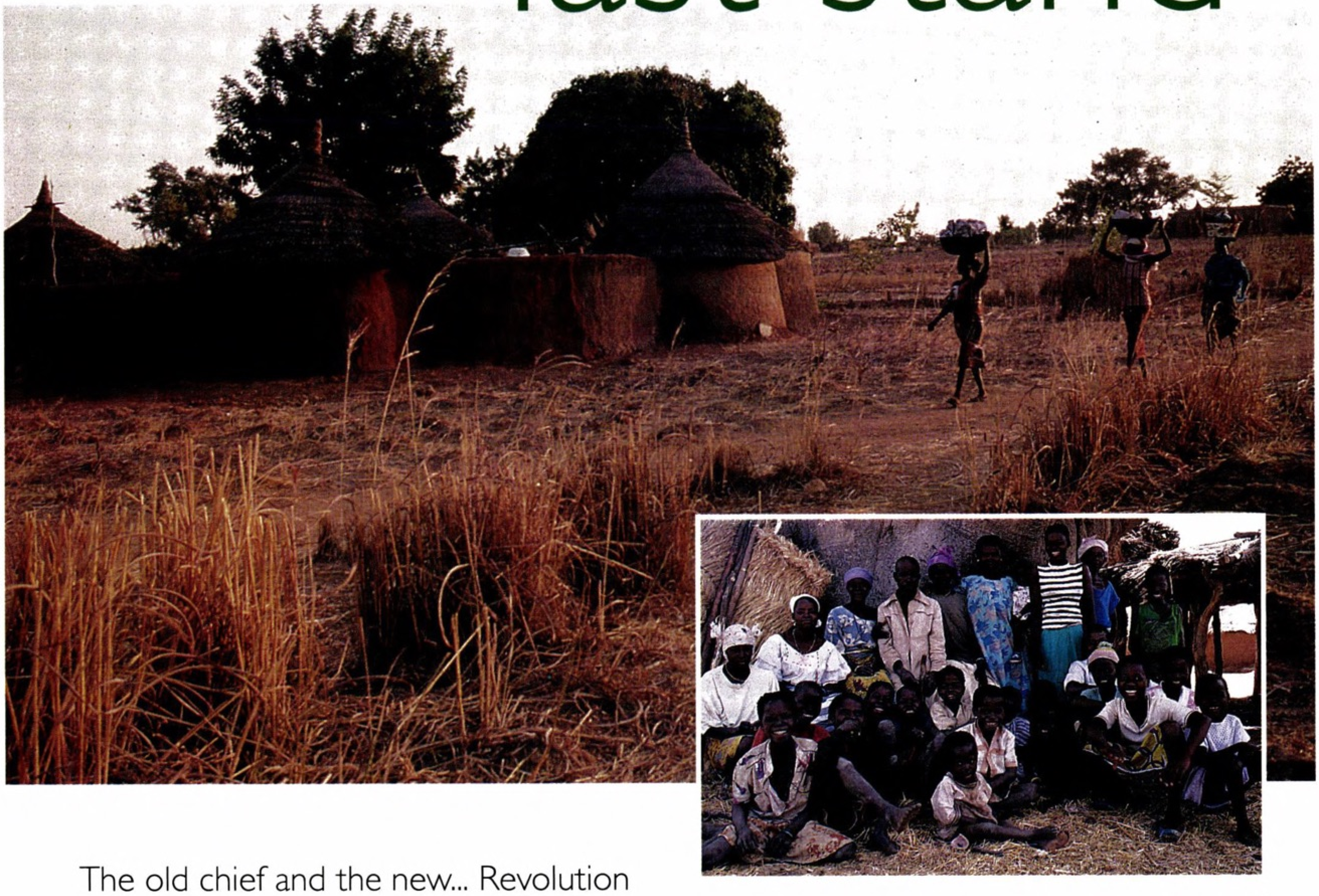
The readiness to embrace the change in attitude to excision is even more evident in Coca's religious life: just last year she converted to Catholicism. Only a missionary would see this as a positive step in and of itself. But the readiness to give up a lifetime of animist practice and belief seems extraordinary – it's hard to imagine someone in the West changing their ideas so completely in the twilight of their life.

'Now I know God,' she says, 'before I didn't.' Does it make her feel different? 'Yes – it's given me new strength – I would never have had the strength to walk all the way to church before.' Now she is Catholic, does she regard her past sacrifices and actions as errors or even as sins? 'I've washed my hands of all that now.' But why convert to Christianity so late in life? 'I was the only one left in my concession. Everyone else in my family had become either Christian or Muslim. And I wanted someone to pray for me when I died.'

This very human answer rings true, as do her magnificently practical reasons for choosing Christianity over Islam. 'If I'd become a Muslim I would have had to get down on my knees five times a day. Look at my body – you can see why that would have been difficult. Whereas as a Christian I just have to make it to the church once a week.

'Besides, if I were Muslim I'd have to give up my *dolo* (sorghum wine) – and I couldn't do that. By the way, you couldn't buy me a calabash of *dolo* in return for all this chat, could you?'

The baobab's last stand



The old chief and the new... Revolution deferred... Why are the trees still standing?... Fire in the eyes of the young...

A once and future forest? Trees are sparse in the village landscape. Inset are the Chief's five wives and twenty of his children. The Chief has disappeared to Ghana for an eye operation so his brother is standing in for the photo – just as he will inherit the wives on the Chief's death.

THE Chief is playing the diplomat. We're sitting in the shade beneath the magnificent old baobab tree that overlooks his concession, brooding over it like an embodiment of the old ways of which he is supposed to be the guardian. A goodly assortment of his five wives and twenty children are ranged around us as we speak. The Chief has just made the descent into blindness – Mariama is shocked when he doesn't respond to my outstretched hand.

Some of the time he is clearly telling me what he thinks I would like to hear: When I ask how he felt about losing his traditional power in the Revolution, for instance, he says this was no problem. But the truth is that the Chief, like every other village head in the country, was deeply upset by the change, which fully merited the term revolutionary. Sankara wanted to root his program firmly in the needs of the peasants who make up the vast majority of the country – and the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) which he set up in each village were the first real democratic voice peasants ever had. Each village elected ten representatives, of which two (including one of the two top posts) had to be women. These committees were also vehicles for the kind of social reform (from primary health care to women's liberation) that Sankara wished to spread from the capital, bypassing the traditional power of the chiefs.

Until the Revolution the politics of the capital had been fairly meaningless for Sabtenga. The parade of coups d'état and farcical elections had minimal impact on such a remote village. Politicians' careers depended on the votes of city-dwellers and their policies thus addressed urban concerns – the same has been true in virtually every African country since independence. People in rural areas were largely left to the diktats – and demands for tribute – of the chiefs.

The Revolution changed that irreversibly, though one of Blaise Compaoré's first acts after his coup d'état was to disband the CDRs (see Page 26). They were eventually replaced by a single elected delegate for each village. The delegates sit in a provincial assembly and implement directives from both regional and national capitals.

This is probably even more galling for the Chief than the CDR system, since it sets up one individual in power over him. The man who has held that power for the last seven years is Yacouba Moné, known to all (even non-French speakers) as *Le Délégué* (The Delegate). There is such constant warfare between them that last year the Chief organized a delegation of 20 of his cronies to go to the regional capital and say they wanted Yacouba removed from his position. They were told that unless Yacouba had been caught with his fingers in the till or had been chasing other men's wives (and no-one was accusing him of this) there was no way he could be removed before the next election. Yacouba drove home his victory by organizing a 60-strong delegation to express their support.

'He wants things to be like they once were,' says Yacouba. 'He can't bear the idea that there is a Delegate with more power in the village than him. But he has to learn. Anything administrative is my province; he has to stick to the ancient customs.'

Yacouba is 52. Ten years ago he happened to be away in Ouagadougou during my stay so he's new to me. He clearly enjoys being the village's elected representative and whatever power and status comes with it. And he talks with understandable pleasure about the one set-piece day of the year when all the village delegates converge on the capital for a session with the National Assembly during which they are addressed by the President.

One day we are sitting in the shade outside his concession. It is that terrible middle period of the day when the sun is wheeling high in its savagery – it is easy to see why the Bissa word for sun, *husu,* is the same as that for 'God'. I am shelling peanuts with the women of the concession and Yacouba is telling me proudly about the line of trees he has planted beside us. He is chair of the village reforestation committee and has been determined to set everyone else an example.

This is another area where I have noticed a big change in the village. Ten years ago it was a woman's job to walk out into the bush, cut down branches for firewood and then carry home enormous bundles on her head. You rarely see that now. This is mainly due to the coercion of the national government which has realized in the last decade the desperate urgency of planting trees to protect the soil and arrest the relentless erosion. Rangers started patrolling the bush and arresting anyone caught cutting down trees.

There is no question that this has made life more difficult for villagers – apart from anything else firewood is yet another thing that they now have to pay for if they are not to make do with burning straw. But there is also no question that they understand the rationale behind the policy in a way they did not a decade ago: time and again I hear the phrase 'trees bring the rain'.

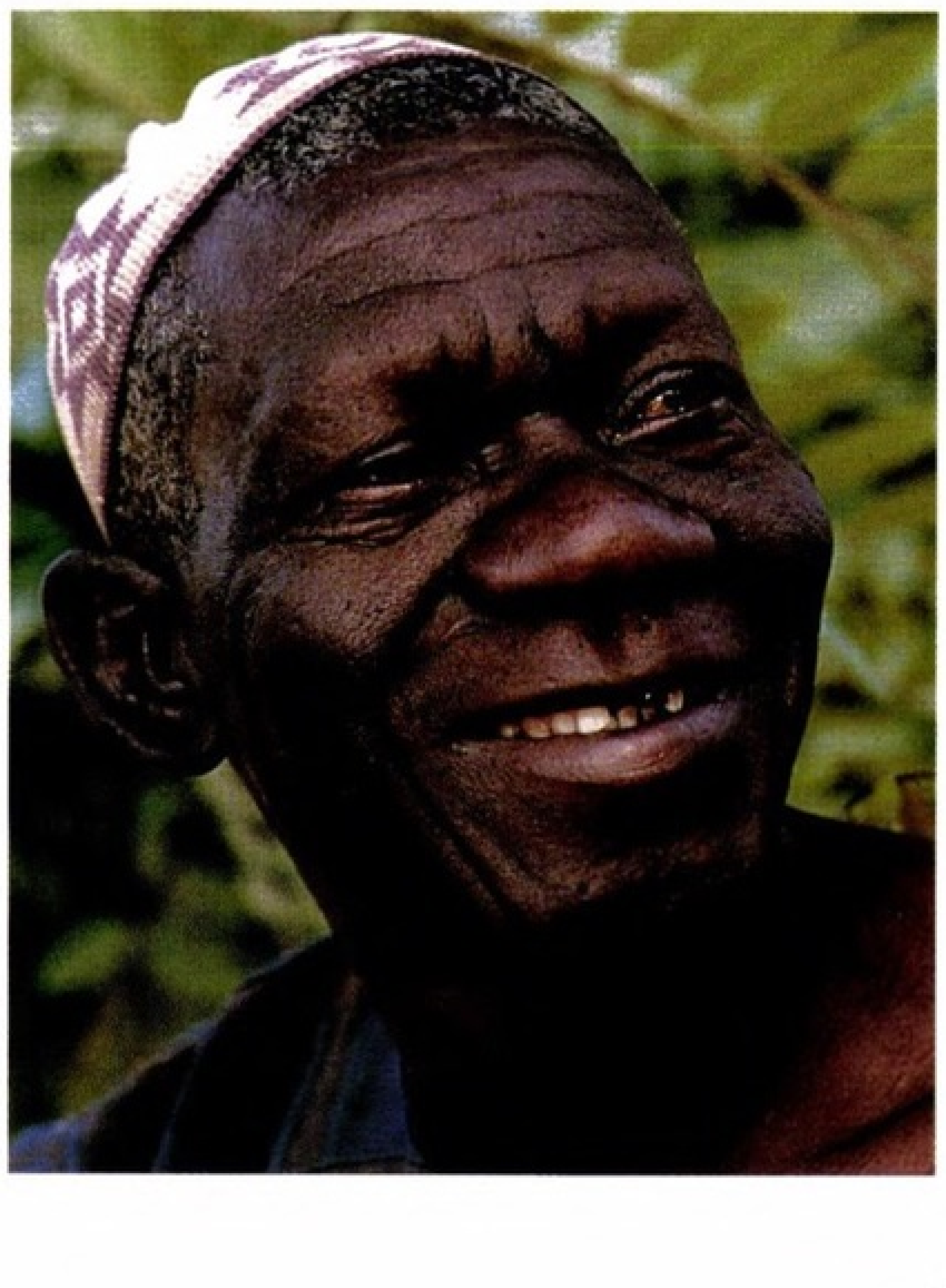
People understand the reasons behind the ban on tree cutting... time and again I hear the phrase 'trees bring the rain'.

The replanting of trees in the village doesn't seem to have gone a lot farther than the odd line of saplings like Yacouba's – though a major new plantation is visible on the far side of the lake. Last year President Compaoré launched the 8,000 Villages, 8,000 Forests campaign. But this year there is no money for new saplings.

I am concerned that most of the new trees (including those Yacouba has planted) seem to be eucalyptus. In development circles eucalyptus is generally considered disastrous for this sort of environment – they drink 1,600 litres of water a year, for example, far more than other varieties. I mention this to Yacouba and suggest his committee should consider planting acacia and fruit trees instead of eucalyptus.

When I get back to England, though, I talk to someone who has been working in community forestry in just this part of Burkina and he disputes the common wisdom. He says eucalyptus encourages local people to plant trees – it grows fast and provides both medicine and straight poles which they can then use or sell to others. And while it does drink a lot of water it drinks it from so deep in the ground that this is only a problem where the water table is seriously low (as it is in the north of the country, though not usually in the Bissa region). It should be treated as a crop rather than as a long-term tree and should be mixed with fruit and acacia trees. At least I got that part right. But this has taught me yet again how problematic it is for an outsider to give advice on development, however knowledgeable they think they are.

The new power in the land: Yacouba The Delegate.



At least I refrain from giving Yacouba advice on politics, though it is difficult to hide my disappointment at the political changes in the country. He is a member of Blaise Compaoré's governing party – in the last Delegate elections candidates were required to stand for particular parties for the first time ever. He is also literally the only person I talk to who has less than praise for Thomas Sankara. I ask how he can support the man who murdered Sankara but he shrugs this off with the perfectly fair point that Sankara too originally came to power as a result of a coup d'état.

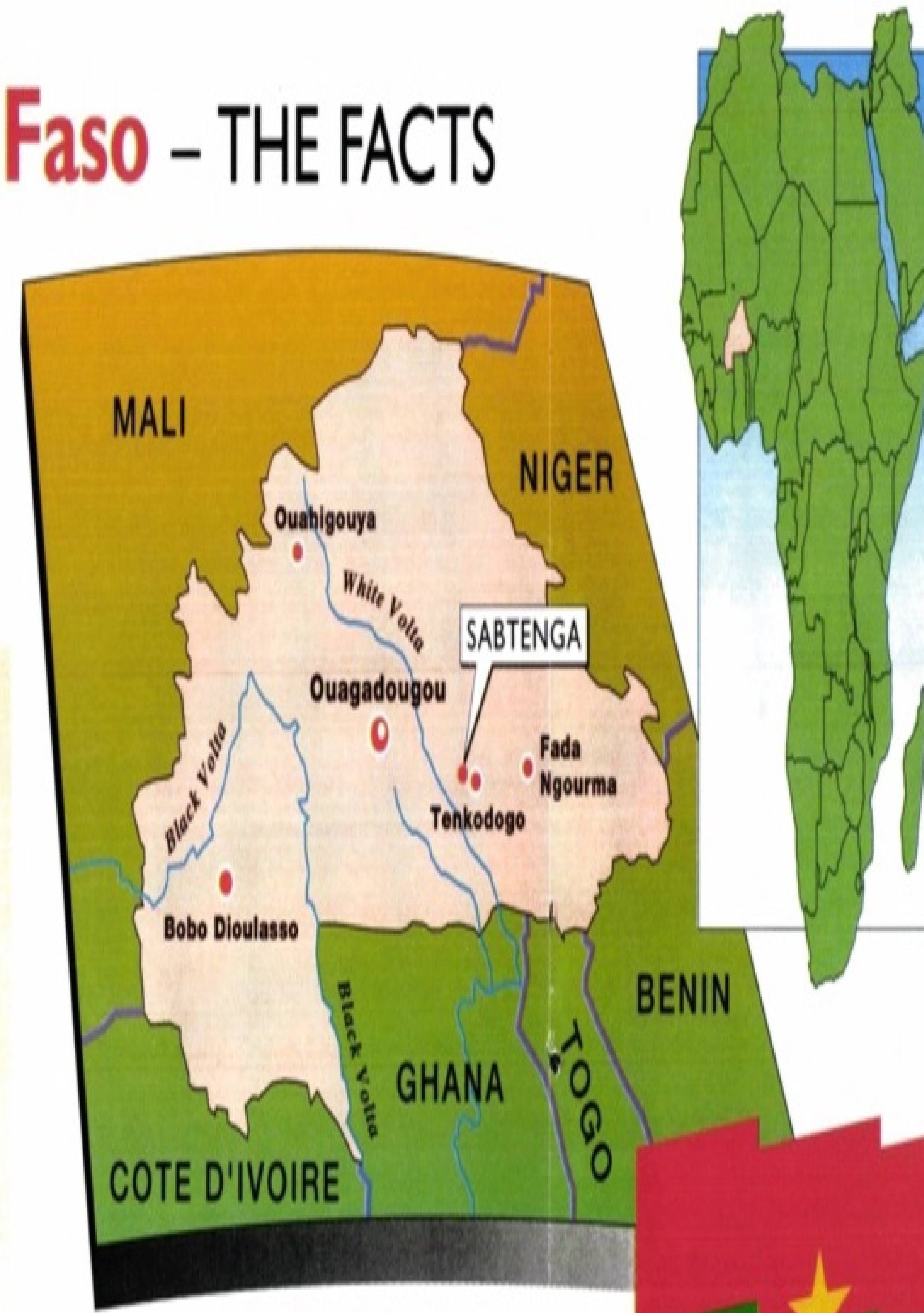
To Yacouba the new watchwords of democracy and modernization are vast improvements on the furore of the Revolution. Yacouba knows full well that Blaise's economic reforms – particularly the devaluation of the currency – are deeply unpopular in the village. But ultimately he knows pretty well that Blaise is here to stay, and that his own position is the more secure for his being associated with the governing party – probably all the more so if the system runs on backscratching instead of idealism.

One villager uses a proverb to express his feeling about the changed politics of Burkina: 'You have to work with the rainy season that comes and not think of the wonderful rains of the past.' It's true: Sankara is gone now and they have to work with the current regime.

But I can't help hoping that those young people I meet in the towns and the capital, who are fighting to keep Sankara's ideas alive, will win out in the end. They have to tread very carefully, since the leading activists in the Association Thomas Sankara, which was trying to take the new democracy at its word and become a political party, have been murdered or forced underground. But they're the ones with fire in their eyes who decry injustice and who realize that something special has been lost in the attempt to win the approval and money of the West. More power to them. ■

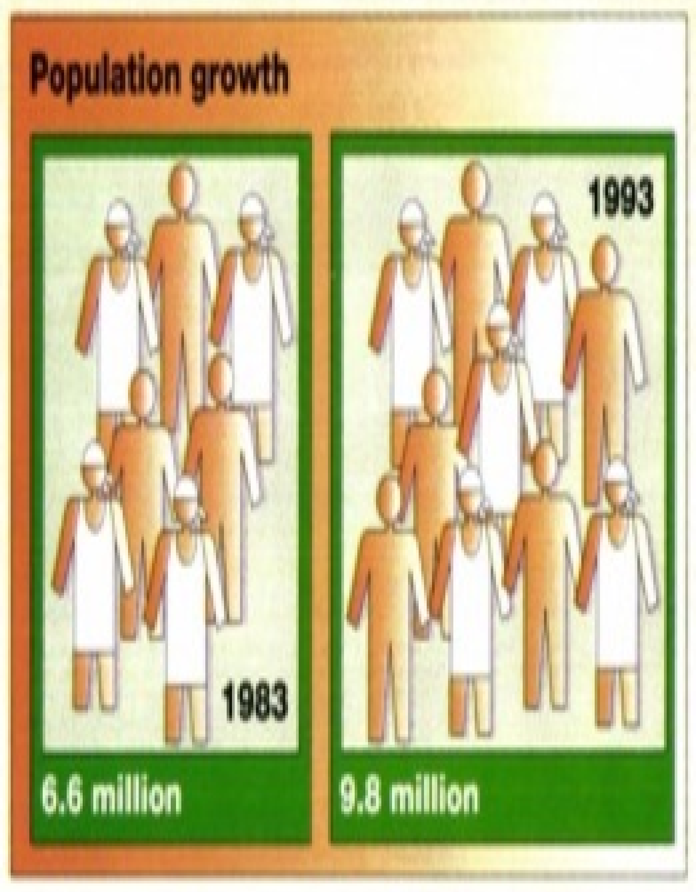
A decade in Burkina Faso – THE FACTS

The 1980s were a bitterly hard decade for Africans – as they struggled against debt and the rigours of economic adjustment imposed by the West. But somehow, against all odds, they have still managed to make some progress. No African country is typical – and Burkina Faso has the second lowest rating in the world on the UN Human Development Index.[1] But even in Burkina they continue to move forward.



PEOPLE

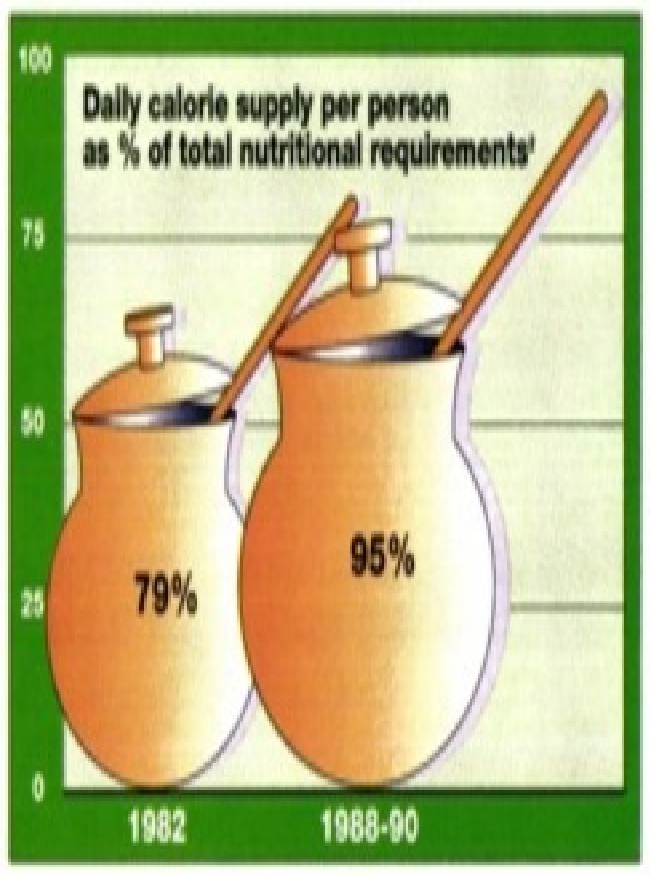
Burkina Faso's population is increasing fast – it has grown by around 50 per cent over the last ten years.[2]

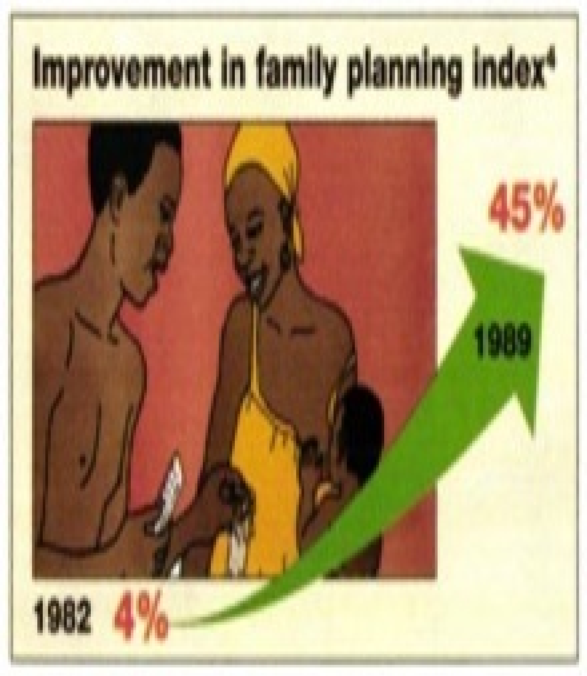


Burkina's population density of 35 people per square kilometre is relatively low – closer to the US's 27 than the UK's 235.[1] But as with many African countries its soil is particularly fragile. Only 13 per cent of the land is cultivable.[3]

The country's achievement in meeting people's food needs over the last decade has been remarkable. Despite the bigger population, food production per head in 1991 was 119 per cent of that in 1979-81.[1]

But with an estimated 7.1 million rural people in absolute poverty there is a clear need both to raise living standards and to make contraception widely available.





◆ Contraceptive usage is estimated to be only 8 per cent. But things are improving. Burkina Faso has recently shown the third biggest improvement in the world on the index assessing family-planning efforts used by the Population Council and UNFPA – surpassed only by Iran and Botswana.

HISTORY

1400 THE MOSSI PEOPLE came to the region from what is now Ghana and established 19 separate kingdoms, each depending on the most powerful central kingdom of Wogodogo (today's Ouagadougou).

1600 THEY CREATED WHAT was effectively a centralized state with a strong administrative system that resisted conquest by neighbouring African empires.

1900 THIS INDEPENDENCE LASTED until the French arrived in 1896, setting up a protectorate over Ouagadougou and making it part of the colony of Haut-Sénégal-Niger in 1904.

1930 IN THE FIRST half of the century the French used the country as a pool of forced labour serving their more prosperous coastal colonies. All young men were dragooned into this virtual slavery.

1960 THE TERRITORY WAS reconstituted as the separate colony of Upper Volta in 1947 and was eventually granted independence in 1960. The modern era has been dominated by fraudulent elections and military coups.

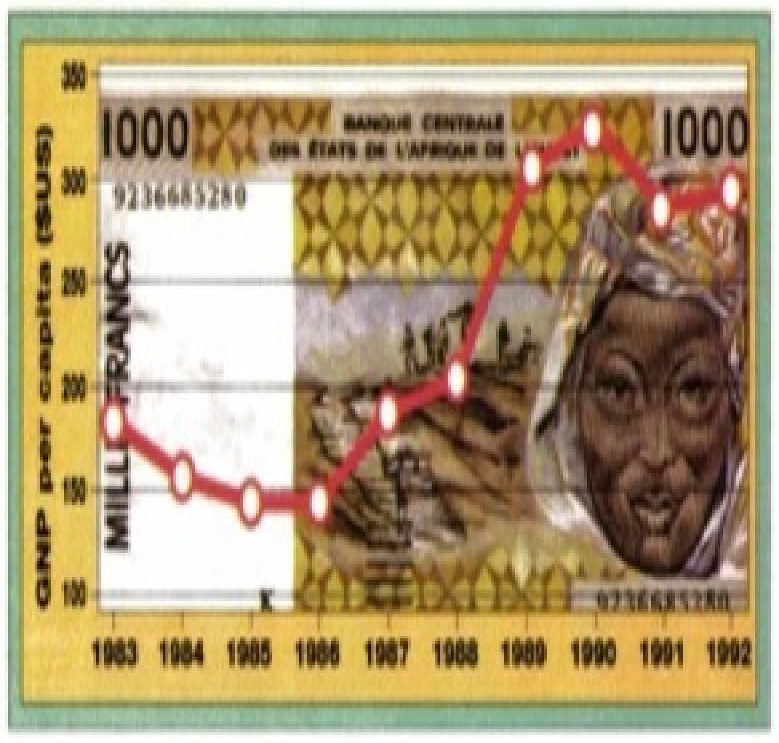
1970 FRANCE RETAINS SIGNIFICANT economic control to this day, not least through the CFA franc, the currency which Burkina shares with other former French African colonies and which is tied to the French franc.

1980 THIS FRENCH INFLUENCE survived the Sankara Revolution of 1983, which mounted a major challenge to neo-colonialism and changed the name of the country to Burkina Faso (Land of the Incorruptible) in 1984.

1990 CURRENT PRESIDENT COMPAORÉ came to power by coup d'état but has since been elected and is an increasing favourite of both Paris and the IMF.

ECONOMY

Burkina Faso's attempt to strike out towards self-reliance and economic independence was officially ended by the new regime's acceptance of IMF loans and structural adjustment from 1990 onwards. Yet the biggest increase in per-capita GNP predated IMF involvement and the adoption of free-market policies.[6]



Foreign debt was low during the Sankara years when the Government was aiming at self-reliance but has soared since as the economy has pursued Westernization – from $681m in 1983 to $1,241m in 1992.[6]

◆ The devaluation of the CFA franc in January 1994 – halving its value in relation to the French franc, and insisted on by Paris and the West as part of 'adjustment' – has caused widespread hardship amongst the poor.

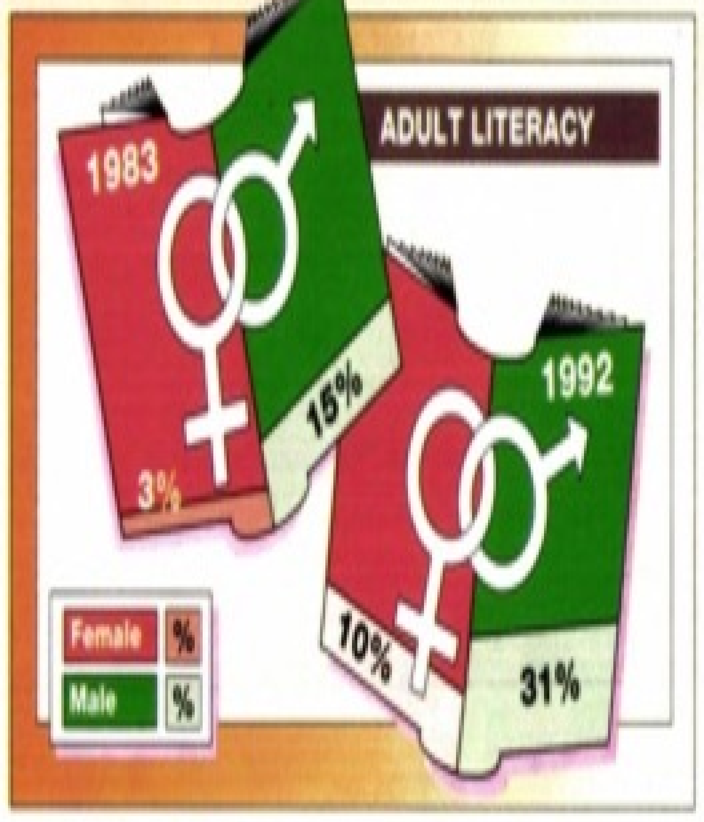
◆ Burkina's traditionally strong cattle industry has been destroyed by the European Union's dumping of its beef mountain on West Africa as aid – at less than half of prevailing world prices. It is now no longer profitable for Burkinabe herders to drive their cattle south to markets in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.[7]

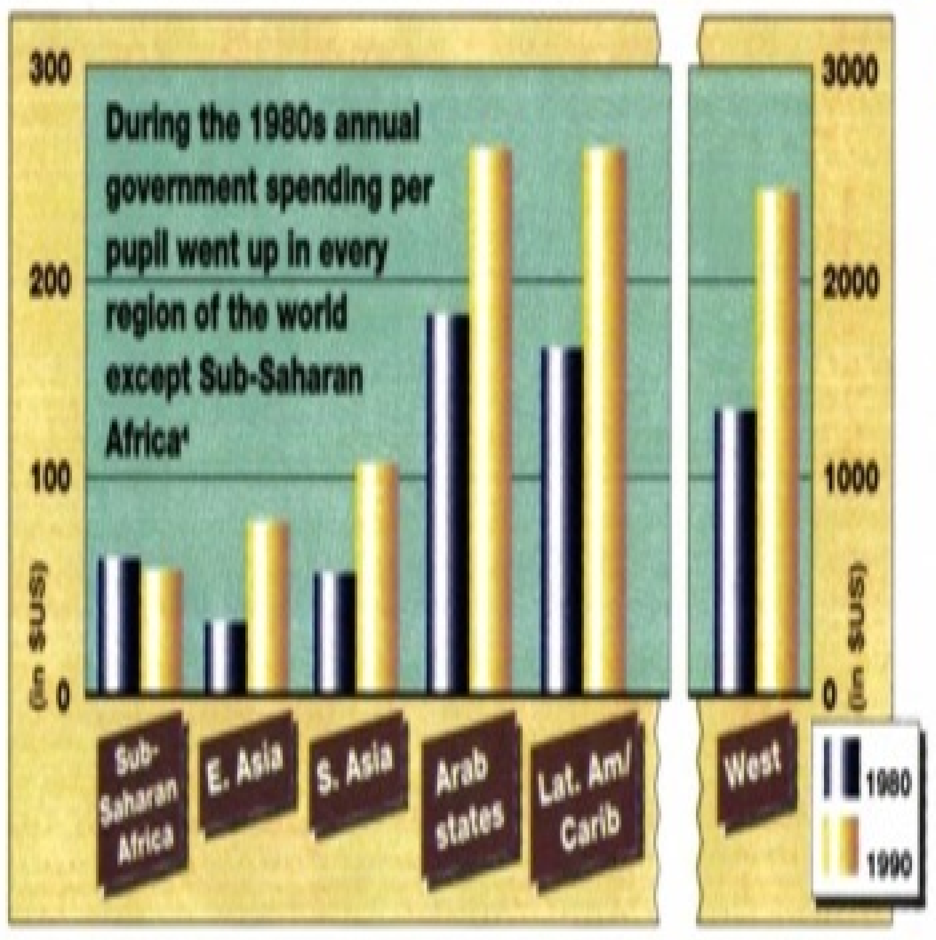
EDUCATION

Burkina Faso has the worst adult-literacy rate in the world, at only 18%.

But even this dismal record has shown slow signs of improvement over the last decade.

◆ Enrolment in Burkina's primary schools has increased from 18% in 1980 to 37% in 1991.

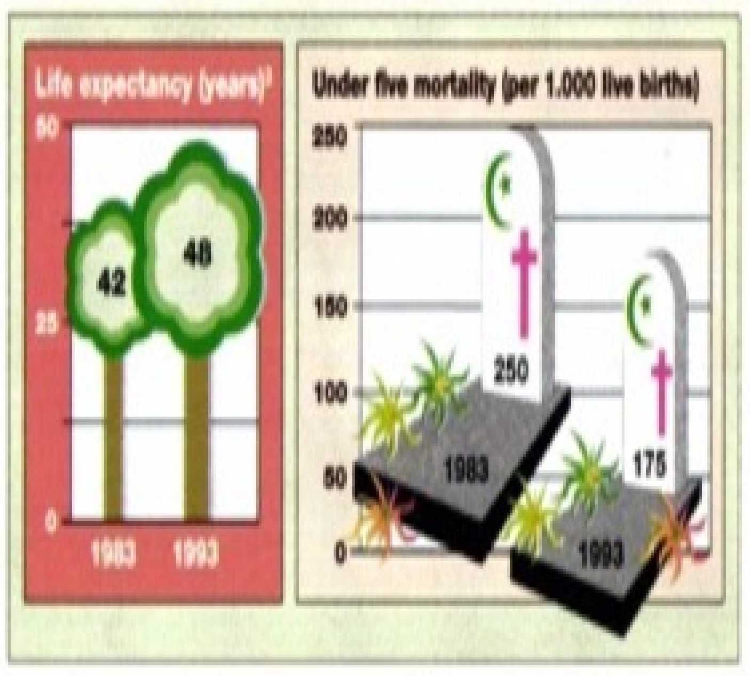




◆ There are 156 primary school-age children per teacher in Burkina Faso, a ratio eclipsed only by Somalia, Afghanistan and Mali.[4]

HEALTH

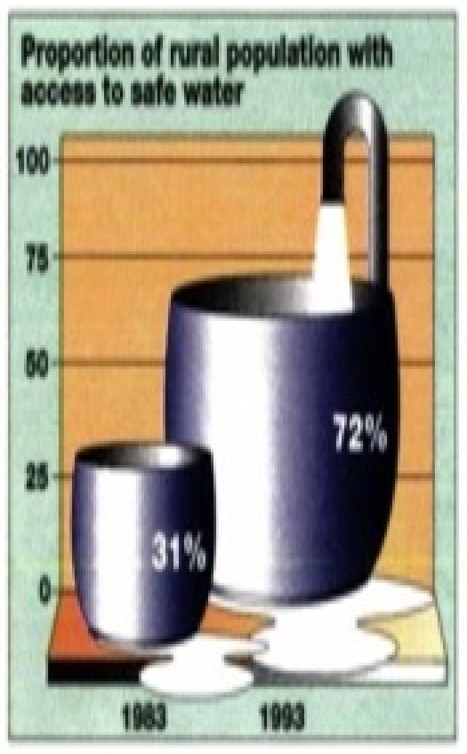
African development strategies have a record of falling short of the mark. But over the long term they are at least producing significant improvements in the headline health statistics – people are living longer and fewer small children are dying.

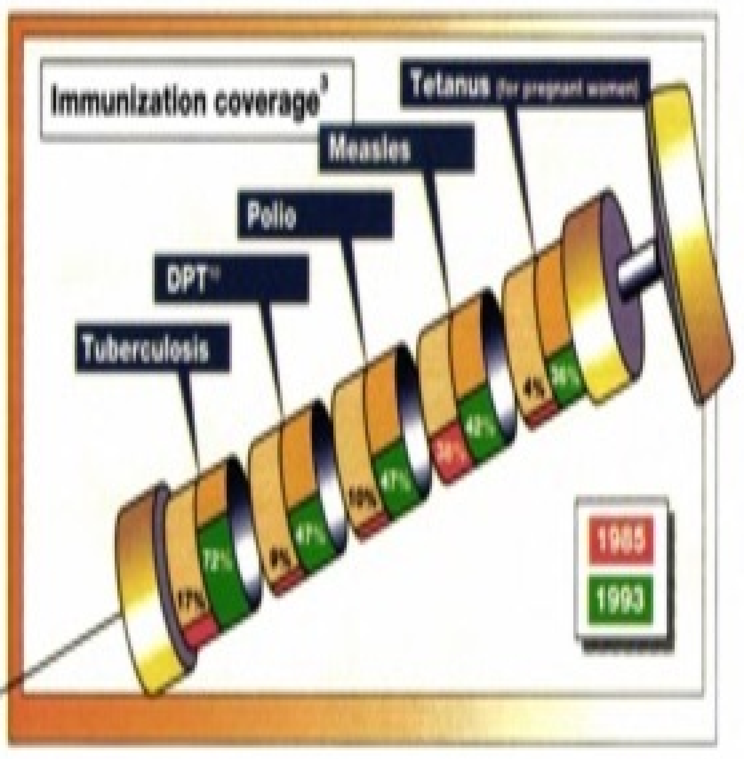


◆ Without AIDS this under-five mortality figure would be projected to fall to 109 by 2010. But if AIDS continues to grow at its current rate the figure will remain static at 175.[4]

◆ During the 1980s Burkina Faso made the fourth fastest progress in the world on provision of safe water to its people, surpassed only by Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Oman.[4]

◆ Access to adequate sanitation in rural areas is, however, still poor, at only 15%.[8]





◆ A major positive influence on health has been the campaign – promoted by UNICEF and the World Health Organization – to immunize as many infants and pregnant women as possible.

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1 *Human Development Report 1994*, UNDP. 2 *The State of the World's Children 1986 and 1995*, UNICEF. 3 *Encarta '95*. 4 *The Progress of Nations*, UNICEF 1994. 5 *The State of the World's Children 1986-95*, UNICEF. 6 *The Africa Review 1987 and 1995*, World of Information. 7 *Africa Review 1993/94*, World of Information. 8 *The State of the World's Children 1995*, UNICEF. 9 UNICEF country report 1995. 10 Diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus.

Thursday at the clinic is mother-and-baby day. Mariama is weighing Naseratu and chatting to her mother Falilatu while Rabietu keeps the records.

Pandora's bottle

The perils of pill patronage... Clinic controversies... Confronting a volcano... Progress and its discontents...

I BROUGHT with me to the village five bottles of aspirin and four packs of chloroquine (to treat malaria). I thought it better to bring gifts for the whole village rather than for individuals so as to skirt round questions of jealousy or favouritism. And I thought giving the pills to the clinic – which I well remember contained no medicines at all ten years ago – would be the most uncomplicated of presents. How wrong can you be?!

Those few pills were to take me on an instructive little journey through the minefield that is aid and development. There were certainly times when I wished I'd left the blessed things behind – but if I had I would have missed out on just the kind of lesson I came to the village to learn.

The saga begins early in my stay when I pull out the aspirin and chloroquine while in the company of Yacouba and Mariama and mention that I am about to give them to the clinic. Yacouba immediately suggests that it would be nice if I gave him and his family a share, the implication being that this is somehow his right as my official host in the village.

I hate this notion with every fibre of my being – the very idea that he merits a cut because of his position of authority as The Delegate violates every principle I hold dear. It seems symbolic of everything that is wrong with politics-as-usual in West Africa and its tendencies to graft and corruption. My reluctance is painfully obvious and the situation quickly becomes embarrassing. Yacouba tries to justify himself by saying that the clinic in central Sabtenga is far away from his area, Bidiga – if I gave the pills to him he could take them on behalf of the people of this district.

He is prepared to insist. I have to give way – I can't afford to cause resentment at the start of my stay. But I still can't bring myself to hand them to him. Instead I put all the pills on the floor and say that he should do what he thinks is right. A bit sheepishly Yacouba picks up one container of each, saying 'For Bidiga'.

The subject comes up again in the evening in what's becoming a regular gathering outside my hut. Each evening I eat my one meal of the day under the stars and set up a chair beside mine so that anyone who wants to can come up and chat – though only those educated enough to speak French or keen enough to speak through an interpreter can really do so. On this occasion the assembled company raise the question of my giving medicines to the clinic, which they have already heard about on the grapevine. They also think this is pretty dumb – it seems obvious to them that it would have been more sensible to give them to my neighbours.

They swear that the clinic will end up selling the pills. I tell them I've been assured by the Nurse, Harouna, that they will be distributed for free. 'He would say that, wouldn't he?' snorts one man. 'He'll say that to your face but after you've gone...!'

I tell them, in case it will make them feel better, that Yacouba has taken one pack of each 'for Bidiga'. This does not help the situation. 'For Bidiga?! For himself!' snorts the same outspoken man.

The fuss lasts for days. People in Bidiga are furious that The Delegate has taken the pills on their behalf – the idea that they could roll up at his concession and ask for them is manifest nonsense to them. But they are almost as incensed about my discourtesy in giving to the clinic instead of to locals.

I tell them I have held back one bottle of aspirin for my own use and that my neighbours can gladly have that when I leave – or before if someone needs it. But I also tell them that there is a question of democracy to be sorted out here. If The Delegate, elected by the people, takes something on their behalf, then they assuredly have the right to demand it from him. But it is also their democratic responsibility to take him to task if they feel he has abused his position of power. There is no sign that they have done this by the time I leave.

But the other key issue is why people feel so disconnected from the clinic, which is, after all, only two kilometres away and seems to me to be one of the most positive changes in the life of the village.

When I was here ten years ago the clinic had just been built but it was an empty shell which made you wonder whether building it had been worthwhile. Sankara had promised to make the UNICEF program for child health an absolute national priority but there was no sign yet in Sabtenga of this happening.

I vividly remember a pathetic episode in which I tried to administer oral rehydration therapy to Mariama's baby boy Bubakar, who was ailing from diarrhoea. I knew that dehydration from diarrhoea is the world's biggest child killer and I couldn't bear the idea that this baby might be wasting away before my eyes for want of a simple solution of salt, sugar and water. The only problem was that I couldn't for the life of me remember in what proportions I should mix them – in writing about the treatment in the abstract I'd never imagined I would one day have to administer it. My concoction was way too heavy on the salt; Bubakar spat it out in disgust and howled the place down. His mother looked at me scornfully as if I'd just tortured him and simultaneously destroyed her faith in Western medicine.

The contrast between then and now could not be greater. Mariama is today herself employed half-time as a medical assistant – doing everything from delivering babies (which she started doing seven years ago) through immunizing children (from four years ago) to administering that same oral rehydration therapy (though this time in small fail-safe packs supplied by UNICEF). The clinic has fewer staff than it would if it were fully resourced. But it is still a hive of activity and represents a major improvement in the village's quality of life.

The baby's mother looked at me scornfully as if I'd just tortured him and destroyed her faith in Western medicine

The care taken over pregnancy, childbirth and the follow-up care seems particularly impressive. Over the weeks I watch a multitude of babies being immunized and their growth monitored, and meet scores of mothers prepared to pay to have their birth and baby supervised by the clinic rather than trusting them to a *yaaba* like Coca Maloni.

Health education is an important part of this pregnancy package. I sit in with Rabietu, Mariama and 14 other women on one of the discussions that precede their monthly examination. These can be on nutrition, hygiene or on different methods of contraception. But the session I attend is on colostrum, the clear fluid which the breast contains immediately after the birth and which is an important source of nutrients and immunities. Bissa tradition holds that colostrum is bad for the baby and only one of the 14 women plans to feed it to her baby – the rest are planning to expel it while waiting for the milk to come in. By the end of the discussion all but one seem to accept the new wisdom. The odd one out claims at the end that she has just been playing devil's advocate because she enjoys a good argument. But she has a wider point – that the cost of having a baby through the clinic ($11 – or $16 if the mother's vagina tears and needs stitching) is simply too great a burden for a subsistence family to bear.

Money is the main problem with the clinic. All medicines have to be paid for, which in practice produces the perception that you can't walk into the place without handing over 100 francs (20 cents). This is national policy rather than the fault of this clinic – the Government clearly doesn't have the funds to pay for free or even subsidized medicines.

But many villagers don't see it this way. Hence the problem with my wretched aspirins. When word gets back to Harouna, the Nurse, that people suspect he will charge patients for them he storms in to see me and demands to know the names of his accusers. I stall him, not at all sure that I want to betray people's names to such a raging bull, but he then rants and raves at the individuals he suspects anyway. The whole issue is by now the talk of the town. Nice to know you can have such a positive impact on a community.

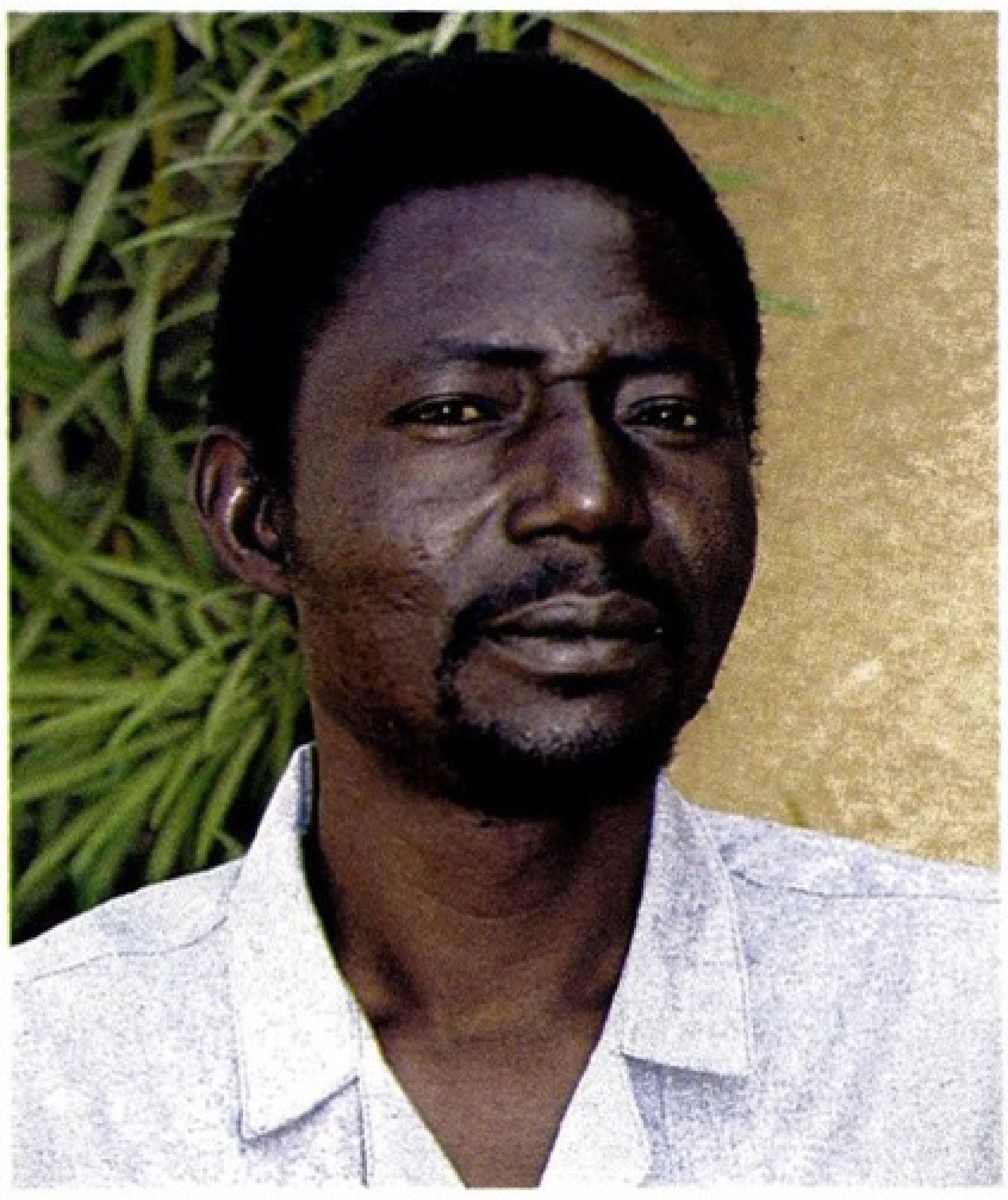
Luckily Harouna calms down by the time I formally interview him a week or so

A new era in the village's health: babies Zanwe, Rose and Nyala are in much safer hands than any previous generation.

later. He explains how the hornet's nest I've stumbled into was first stirred up. A few years ago a French charity stocked up the clinic on a one-time basis with medicines for free distribution. Doubtless some of those medicines saved lives that would otherwise have been lost. But ever since then many people in Sabtenga have expected free medicines and have supposed that any charge is a scam by the clinic staff.

It's a lesson in the distorting effect that seemingly magnanimous aid can have on local conditions. It is not dissimilar to food aid and its damaging impact on the prices farmers can get for their crops. Aid can only be injected into a society in the most careful and sensitive way. Harouna says he would much rather I had not come bearing gifts because by doing so I have further muddied the already cloudy issue of payment.

But I'm afraid money is not the only thing standing between the clinic and the confidence of the community it serves – the other thing is Harouna himself. He really is a most irascible man – the raging-bull incident over the guilty names was actually not at all untypical. The very first moment I met him he launched off into a tirade of abuse against Mariama, who of course works for him. He was full of smiles afterwards, claiming a misunderstanding, but I had the distinct impression that he was putting on a display of his own power for my benefit. His success in intimidating me makes it easy to understand why many villagers feel he doesn't quite have the bedside manner they would wish for.



Irascible and disenchanted: Harouna the Nurse.

I feel duty bound to confront Harouna about his abrasiveness and I fully anticipate a Krakatoan response. To my surprise he takes it quite calmly, though I'm not sure what he says does him much credit.

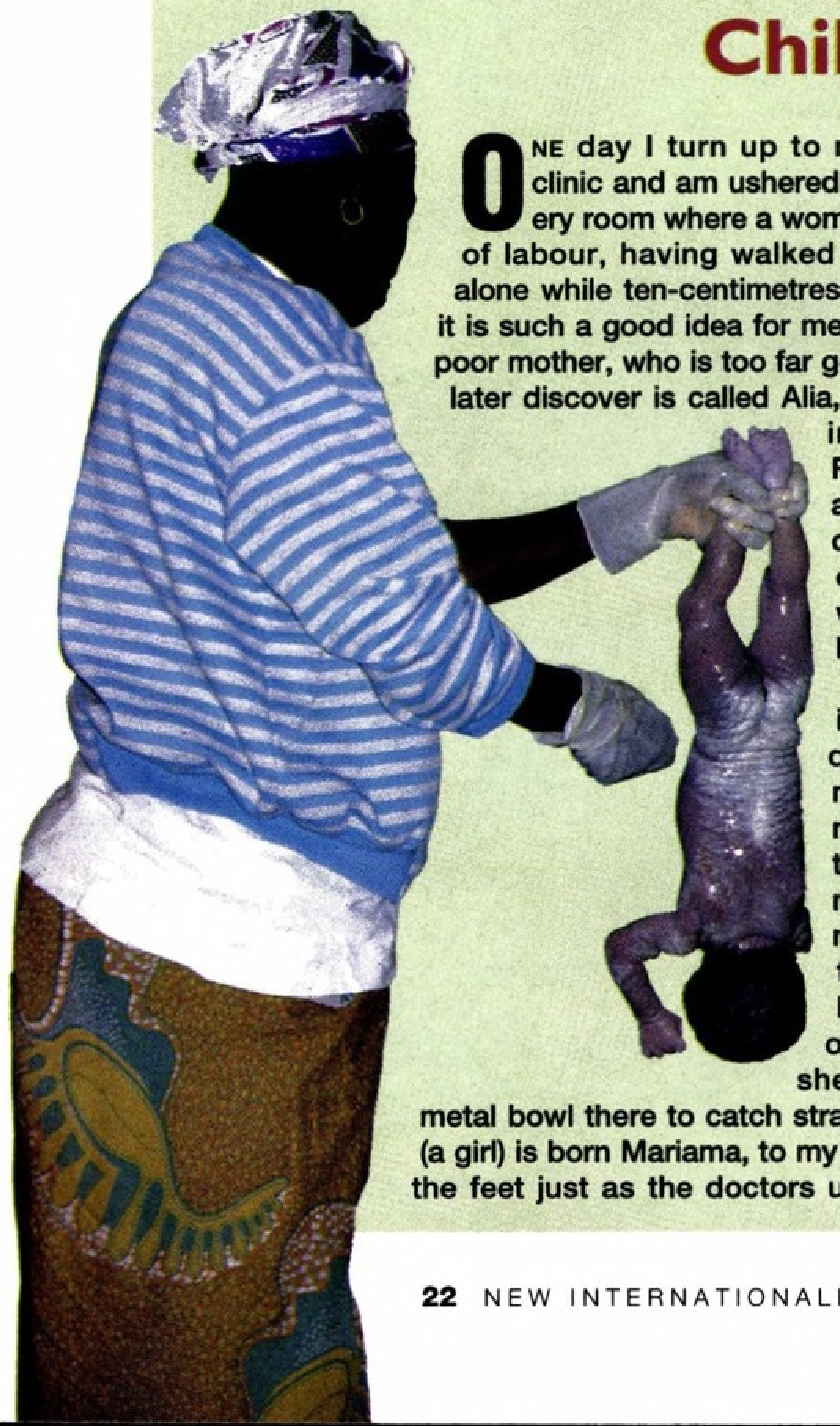
'I don't understand this village,' he says. 'Everywhere else I've worked [and he's had seven other postings since 1969] I've had no problems and been well liked. Here I've had trouble right from the start. I told people then that if they had a problem with me they should tell me to my face; instead they just beef about me behind my back. They're damned right I get angry. The language is one problem: I don't speak Bissa and not everyone in the village speaks Moré or French. But in my other postings – two of which were in Bissa communities – that never caused any trouble.

'Given all this I'm not motivated to mend fences with the village and I'll be seeking a transfer when my two years are up in December. I'm demotivated. I wasn't welcomed. Now I just do the minimum.'

The negative feeling seems mutual: Yacouba, who inevitably chairs the village health committee, tells me he has already complained to Harouna about his behaviour and will be asking the authorities to move him on. They can't seem to get rid of each other fast enough.

This is a shame because I am genuinely impressed with the way the clinic works, which far exceeds my expectations when I arrived. Notwithstanding all the problems, the health of the village is infinitely improved and things which seemed so difficult and distant ten years ago – from family planning to treatment for diarrhoea – are now on everyone's doorstep. But it's fascinating too to witness all the burning issues concealed beneath the surface. Statistics, even optimistic ones, never tell the full human story. ■

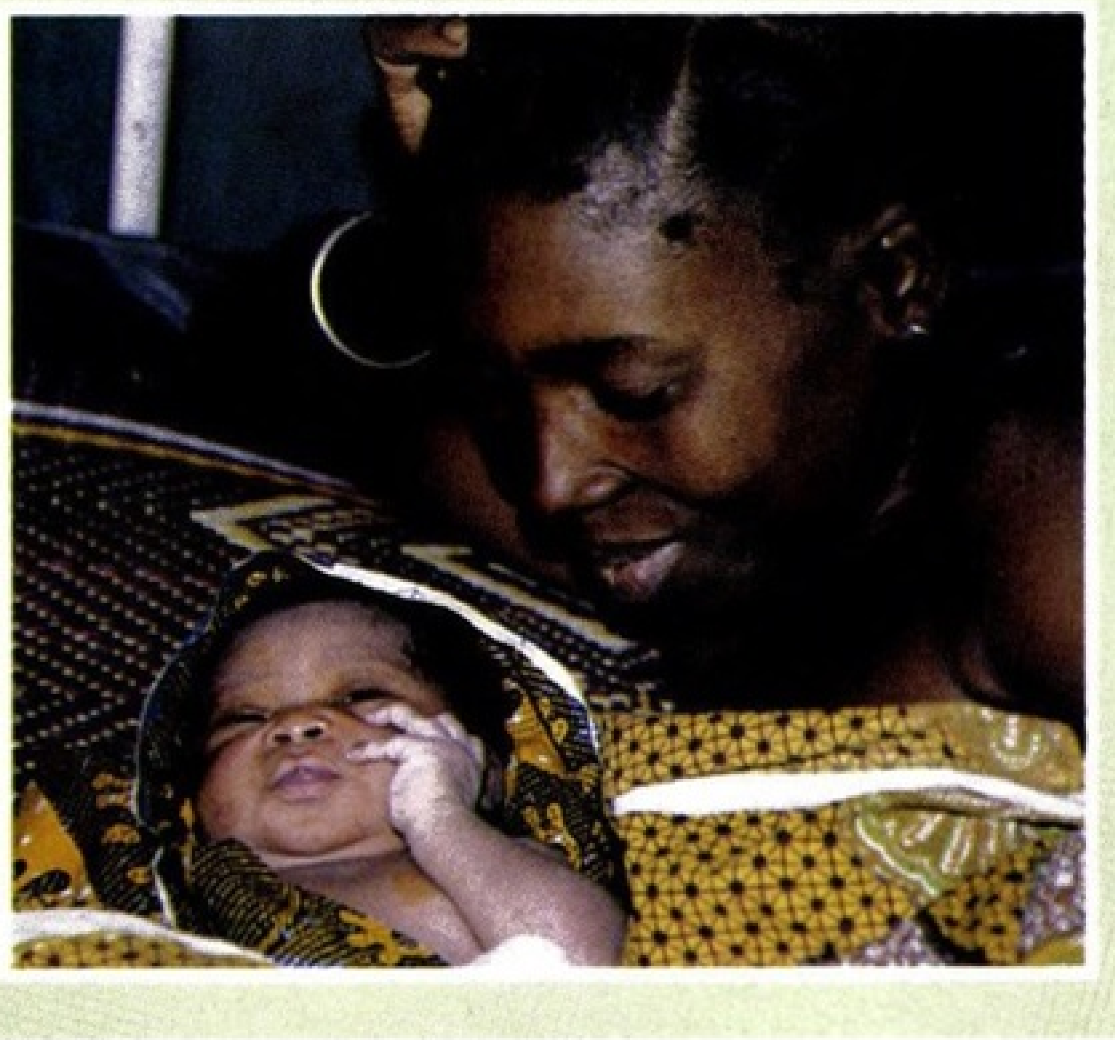
Childbirth Sabtenga-style



One day I turn up to meet Mariama at the clinic and am ushered straight into the delivery room where a woman is in the last stages of labour, having walked over from her house alone while ten-centimetres dilated. I am not sure it is such a good idea for me to be here – does the poor mother, who is too far gone to ask and whom I later discover is called Alia, really want me sitting in? But Mariama and Rabietu insist it is okay and usher me to the other side of the darkened room where I watch with mixed and heightened feelings.

The birth reaches its crisis almost immediately. There isn't, it must be said, much natural-birth finesse to the delivery – Mariama more or less bullies the mother into pushing the baby out, slapping her tummy to urge her on while also insisting she stays perched on a metal bowl there to catch stray fluid. Once the baby (a girl) is born Mariama, to my alarm, picks her up by the feet just as the doctors used to in the movies. After the baby is cleaned and weighed there ensues a terrible period as Alia's vaginal tear is stitched up – without any anaesthetic, of course. Probably there is no other way in those circumstances but to plough on ignoring the woman's cries of agony. Two weeks later I witness the alternative as a teenage woman struggles in, having torn during her delivery at home and not been stitched. Her whole vaginal area is badly infected and she is referred on to the hospital in Tenkodogo by the nurse – she will have to get there on the bus and then pay a great deal to be treated.

Needless to say, watching Alia's labour brings back a lot of the emotions attached to my own children's births, and tears spring to my eyes as if they were umbilically tied to this aspect of human experience. But I have sufficient of the ruthless journalist in me to take a photo immediately after the birth – and a few minutes later, when her ordeal is over, to ask Alia if I can take another of the two of them in the afterglow. So here they are: the healthy baby is Alia's sixth (though two of those died in infancy) and she is named Falilatu in a Muslim ceremony that I attend five days later.



ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE: CHRIS BRAZIER

Rapt by riches: a lesson at the village school about life in England.

Across the great divide

One World feelings undermined... Snapshots of paradise... The school that's waiting to be built... A girl who is high on learning and a boy with a burden...

'YOU whites – your skins are like those of new-born babies,' says Mariama one day, the day we walk seven kilometres through the bush in the midday heat to the neighbouring village of Sago. 'Ours are tough.' This emphasis on my difference becomes a recurring theme, which isn't exactly what I'd intended.

My main reason for returning to Sabtenga, after all, was to stress the human connection between people on either side of the Great Divide. And it's true that the cultural changes in the village over the last ten years – the impact of modernization, really – have, for good or ill, rendered people more comprehensible and closer to us.

Yet throughout my time in the village my most vivid feeling is one of pain and embarrassment at the vast economic chasm between us. I write about the interaction between rich world and poor world all the time – that's my job. But I have never before felt my nose so pressed up against the glass that separates us, been so acutely conscious of how much I have in material terms compared with all the people around me.

I have brought with me, for example, some photos showing my life in England –

Exercise break at Sabtenga School. The running is for sheer joy rather than competition but these children have already far outpaced the 50 for whom there was no place. And less than a quarter of these will race on into secondary school.

my partner and children, my house and car, my daughter's school, the **NI** office and team, a typical supermarket, a double-decker bus and so on. I knew people in the village would be fascinated by these and that they would help me to re-establish a connection with them. And I was right about that. But my primary purpose in showing people the photographs – to build a bridge of understanding between their world and ours – is consistently frustrated.

People are staggered by the sheer wealth of the world revealed by the snapshots. And for many of them it is as if they take the photos as a personal reflection upon their own poverty. Mariama's habitual sigh of '*c'est pas facile*' (it's not easy) becomes almost a mantra as she looks at them – and she tells me straight that this verbal reflex is a comment on the hardship of her own life. Another time she asks me if I think her house is as beautiful as she thinks mine is. What can I say? To say yes I find it beautiful (as I do in one sense) would be a condescending insult in this context. It would be more honest to talk about slavery, the colonial century and the foundation they have provided for my own comfort. I manage to escape without answering.

The place where the photos really do their job is in the lesson I give about life in England to the oldest class in the village school. This produces some lively interest – and some illuminating questions once the children overcome their inevitable reticence. How do you hunt? How do you keep animals? How do you eat? Do you fetch wood for your fire? Do you have wells? What do children wear to school? Are their teachers like ours? Do you have Peulh (nomadic pastoralists)? Do you have black people? Are black people accepted by white people? Do you carry babies on your backs like we do?

The school is a breeze-block building containing three classrooms. There should really be six classes here corresponding to the six years of primary education but in the absence of a second building the school can only take in new seven-year-old pupils once every two years. On the day of admission prospective pupils queue up and the first 64 are admitted for an education; the 50 or so others simply have to do without.

The Government has promised that it will provide three more teachers' salaries if the villagers can erect a second three-classroom building. So back in 1992 villagers got together to pay for and work on the foundations of this second school building – they knew they would have no chance of getting money from outside unless they showed this collective commitment. And despite lobbying of government and foreign aid agencies in Ouagadougou, there is still nothing but the foundations in place. Meanwhile every two years 50 of Sabtenga's children are left with no education. All for want of $22,000, little more than my partner and I just paid to convert the loft of our house into an extra bedroom.

The children sit at desks ranged in rows of three along both the long sides of the room, with blackboards at each end. Given the class size of more than 60 it's hardly surprising that the teaching methods have to be quite traditional. The teacher stands up front and runs the children through their paces. And the teacher I watch in action – Idrissa Ky, a tall and good-looking 34-year-old man from the Samo people on the other side of the country – seems pretty good to me. He is clearly in control, but his firmness is balanced by his careful and patient explanations.

The children range from 11 to 15 years and look an average enough cross-section of the village. They are doing mathematics, which is not my strong suit, but to me the standard seems surprisingly high, especially since they are coping with it in a foreign language (all education is in the former colonial language, French). Now I see the bridge those dusty, snotty kids running around outside cross over to become the sharp teenagers with whom I discuss things in the evenings.

The missing link personified is perhaps Zenabou's daughter Salamatu. She was just a toddler hanging on her mother's breast ten years ago – there was a magical scene in the film when the two of them watched the first long-awaited raindrops falling. Now Salamatu has bright and lively eyes and radiates an enthusiasm for learning which is truly heartening – one day she proudly recites a poem to me on the way home from school. On another occasion she demonstrates her reading, using a grotesquely inappropriate textbook full of white children and Parisian landmarks. This must have dated from her parents' schooldays since now the texts are impeccably Africanized – though the exercise books the children use (from Côte d'Ivoire) are covered with pictures of black Americans like Michael Jordan and Whitney Houston. Salamatu's bears the words of rap artist Kris Kross: 'I'm the wrong brother for suckers to be messin with/ Cos when I put the mike in my hand I start wreckin it.' How appropriate...

I ask Salamatu's father Adama if he will be prepared to pay for her to attend secondary school in Garango if she is one of the 15 or so who pass the national exam at the end of six years' village schooling. He says he will, which is encouraging in itself since there are only 14 girls in a class of 64 in Garango at the moment. This is partly due to parents not placing high value on a daughter's education. But it is also because girls imbibe early on the idea that education is not for them. Salamatu's half-sister Rasmatu, for instance, used to leave home with her satchel simply to hide in the bush all day. Last year the teachers threw her out.

Education can be a route out of poverty in any society. And many parents are now aware that the sacrifices involved in paying for their children to be educated will pay dividends later on. Take Francois Moné, one of Sabtenga's most prominent sons, who passed a national exam to become an army pilot and now travels regularly in Africa and Europe for work. He maintains a very decent lifestyle in the capital and has enough left over to pay for new-style houses for some of his older relatives.

But the investment is harder for some than for others. Habibu is a widow who pays for her son Momini to go to secondary school. She lives just down the hill from me and early on in my stay I arrange for her to provide me with an evening meal in return for a decent daily sum. I feel this is the best way to cope with the economic divide between me and the village: to pay well over the market price for any services I receive, like Habibu's meals and Mariama's translation.

But otherwise I generally refrain from giving people money – rightly or wrongly I feel that once the dam of this rule bursts, I will find myself in serious trouble. The money backing me up effectively makes me a kind of god. So little in my own society's terms could make so much difference to people here. But I find myself utterly incapable of making godlike decisions. How can you give money to a boy to repair the bike he needs to get to school when an old woman elsewhere in the village is on the brink of starvation? How do you decide whom should take priority?

I find it unbearable living alongside human beings who live so close to the edge, where people periodically die of hunger or disease born of plain and simple poverty. I have reluctantly got used to the idea that developing countries cannot afford to provide a safety net: you look after yourself or you die. But somehow ten years ago I – romantically – came to think of the *concession* as the very embodiment of the extended family. I assumed that if a person fell on hard times someone else in the wider family would rescue them.

But it doesn't work like that. The sad and terrible fact is that people here live so close to the brink themselves that they can't afford to take responsibility for each other's misery – and this lesson of tough peasant stoicism must be etched on their bones. What right do we have to say it should be otherwise, given the hardship we gloss over in our own societies, let alone in these other quarters of the world?

How can you give money to a boy to repair the bike he needs to get to school when an old woman elsewhere in the village is on the brink of starvation?

Habibu is a classic case of someone truly on her own. Her husband Tasseré was poisoned in Abidjan – a mysterious case involving a curse and some of the old magic, by her account – and died back in the village after a year of her nursing him. Now she must simply grow enough for herself and her three children to eat all year from her own fields – and try to cook things for sale in the market to raise the cash needed for Momini's schooling. Life could not be harder and she has an air of weariness about her all the time. One night as the light from the kerosene lamp falls on her face, looking for all the world like she is in a painting by de La Tour, I ask about her hopes and dreams for the future.

'Just for us all to be healthy,' she says. 'And for Momini, who is my great hope, to find a job that will make us all secure.' It's a tough burden for a teenage boy to bear. And with the Government now going down the IMF/World Bank road of structural adjustment – while at the same time turning a blind eye to corruption and nepotism – the salvation of secure employment is unlikely. Educational qualifications simply do not lead to jobs even to the extent that they used to ten years ago. Politicians and businesspeople in the capital are now buying their relations the new posts.

I would be duping you and betraying the people of the village if, in my concern to look for hopeful stories, I did not tell you that the material gulf between our lives and theirs is obscene. Not all the world's people can live like we do – but we could still have a decent life while giving the people of this village, this country, this continent, this Majority World, the fairer deal that ought to be their birthright. As Thomas Sankara said once: 'Whilst elsewhere people die from being too well-nourished, here we die from lack of nourishment. Between these two extremes there is a way of life to be discovered if each of us meets the other halfway.' ■

Light relief for the widowed Habibu in front of her concession. Mariama is chewing on a twig to offset hunger pangs during the daily fast for Ramadan, known locally as 'Karem'.

Who killed the

There is actually no murder mystery: when Thomas Sankara (left) was killed after four years as President of Burkina Faso, it was at the orders – if not at the hands – of one of his oldest friends, now President Blaise Compaoré (right). Echoes of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as much as Disney's *The Lion King*.

Why should we care about this particular African tragedy? We should care because the revolution Sankara led between 1983 and 1987 was one of the most creative

LANDIS Y McINTIRE / WEST AFRICA

'I would like to leave behind me the conviction that if we maintain a certain amount of caution and organization we deserve victory... You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage

An incorruptible man

- **A MAJOR ANTI-CORRUPTION drive began in 1987. The tribunal showed Captain Thomas Sankara to have a salary of only $450 a month and his most valuable possessions to be a car, four bikes, three guitars, a fridge and a broken freezer. He was the world's poorest president.**
- **Sankara refused to use the air conditioning in his office on the grounds that such luxury was not available to anyone but a handful of Burkinabes.**
- **When asked why he had let it be known that he did not want his portrait hung in public places, as is the norm for other African leaders (and as Blaise Compaoré does now), Sankara said 'There are seven million Thomas Sankaras'.**

Chronicle of a revolution

Feb 1984 Tribute payments to and obligatory labour for the traditional village chiefs are outlawed.

4 Aug 1984 All land and mineral wealth are nationalized. The country's name is changed from the colonial Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, words from two different local languages meaning 'Land of the Incorruptible'.

22 Sept 1984 A day of solidarity: men are encouraged to go to market and prepare meals to experience for themselves the conditions faced by women.

Oct 1984 The rural poll tax is abolished.

Nov 1984 'Vaccination Commando'. In 15 days 2.5 million children are immunized against meningitis, yellow fever and measles.

3 Dec 1984 Top civil servants and military officers are required to give one month's pay and other civil servants to give half a month to help fund social development projects.

31 Dec 1984 All domestic rents are suspended for 1985 and a massive public housing construction program begins.

1 Jan 1985 Launch of a campaign to plant 10 million trees to slow the Sahara's advance.

4 Aug 1985 An all-women parade marks the anniversary of the Revolution.

10 Sep 1985 The mounting hostility of the region's conservative regimes is revealed at a meeting in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire.

Feb-Apr 1986 'Alpha Commando'. A literacy campaign in nine indigenous languages involves 35,000 people.

End of 1986 A UN-assisted program brings river blindness under control.

15 Oct 1987 Sankara is assassinated in a coup d'état along with 12 aides. His body is unceremoniously dumped in a makeshift grave which quickly becomes a shrine as for days thousands of people file past it to pay their respects. Popular feeling forces the new regime to give Sankara a decent grave.

A villager's assessment of Sankara

'I wasn't surprised when he was killed – the Revolution took me by surprise but *that* didn't. He had bad men around him, people who just wanted to get fat and drive around in big cars. Many things changed in the Revolution. Not always in the best way. But because of the Revolution we know a little more about the type of politicians we need. It taught us to work by ourselves for ourselves. But Sankara wanted everything to happen too quickly – he expected too much.

'If I were President myself I would do just as Sankara did and send my ministers out to the villages to learn what it's like there and give the peasants help. Sankara's very best idea was to teach us that it wasn't enough to live with what we get in wages each month – we should get by with the minimum and give the rest to the development of the country instead of always asking for aid from overseas.'

Lion King?

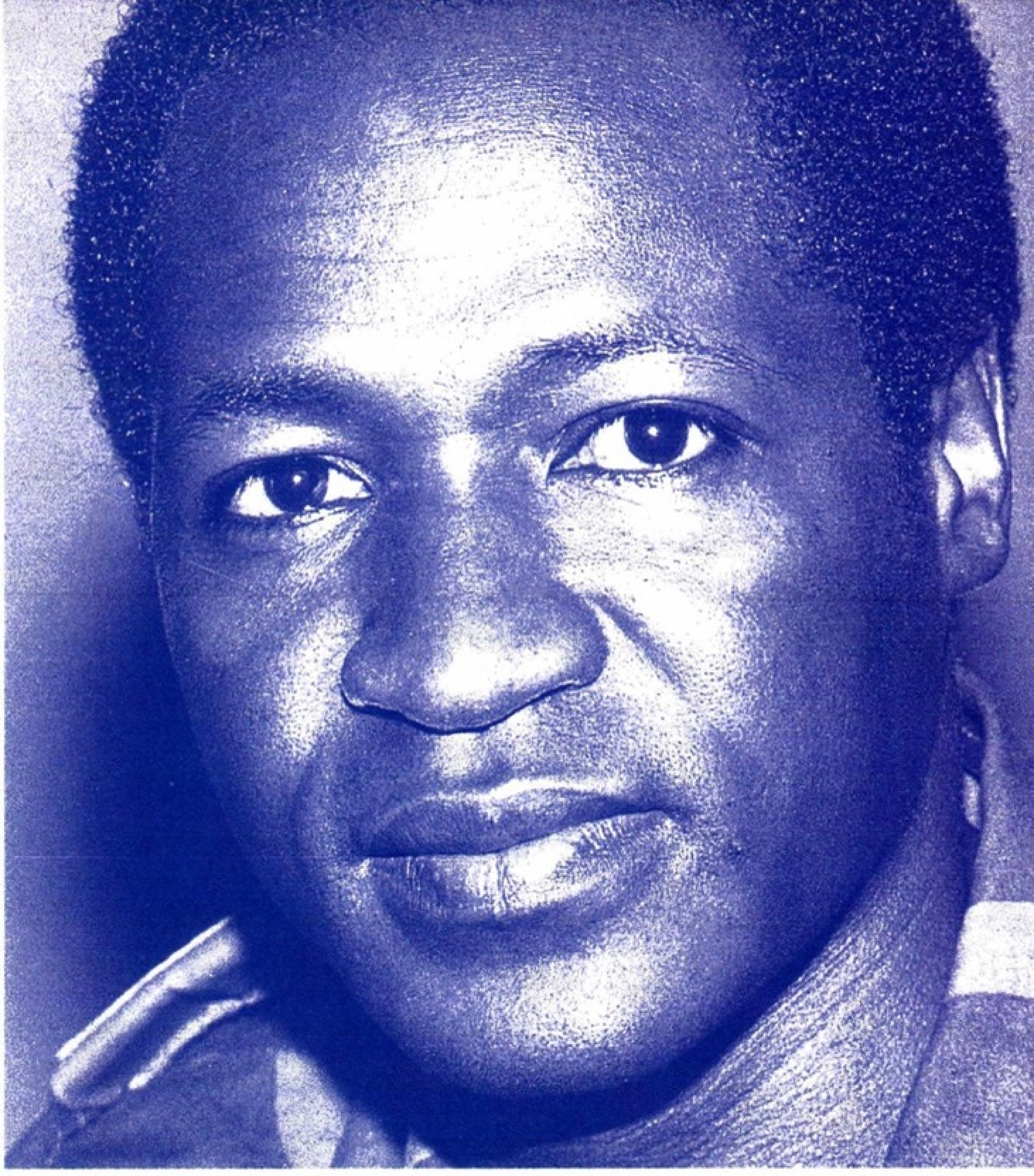
and radical that Africa has produced in the decades since independence. He started to blaze a trail that other African countries might follow, a genuine alternative to Western-style modernization – and, like other radical African leaders such as Patrice Lumumba and Amilcar Cabral, was shot down as a result. Whereas his murderer, still in power eight years later, has pursued self-enrichment and politics as usual – and has been fêted by the West for his compliance.

ICA
UHURU
UJAMAA
VIVA
Nkosi Sikelel'i AFRIKA

ILLUSTRATION: CAROLINE CULLINAN

to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. We must dare to invent the future.'

Thomas Sankara, 1985



NORA PETERS / WINGS / WEST AFRICA

An eminently corruptible man

- **CAPTAIN BLAISE COMPAORÉ played a key part in the 1983 Revolution – he led the march on the capital that released Sankara from house arrest to become President. Compaoré himself served as Justice Minister and Sankara's effective second-in-command.**
- **Compaoré has garnered a considerable personal fortune from his position and allegations of corruption and nepotism under his regime now abound. One of his early acts was to buy a presidential plane to reflect his personal prestige.**
- **Power from a major new hydro project has been diverted to electrify Compaoré's home village, Ziniaré, while big towns have been ignored.**

Chronicle of a 'rectification'

15 Oct 1987 Blaise Compaoré assumes the Presidency, backed by Major Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Captain Henri Zongo.

Nov 1987 The Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the local bodies which had replaced traditional élites, are abolished.

1988 Salaries of civil servants, reduced under Sankara, are increased and the special tax that forced them to contribute to health and education projects is scrapped.

Dec 1988 A World Bank report lauds the unusually high standards of financial management in Burkina Faso during the revolutionary years while noting the increasing incidence of corruption since Compaoré's takeover.

Sept 1989 Lingani and Zongo attempt to oust Compaoré in a coup and are executed.

Dec 1989 31 Sankara supporters are detained without trial for over a year. Lecturer Guillaume Sessouma dies during torture.

Dec 1990 The draft constitution guarantees freedom of association and expression and property rights. It provides for an elected President and National Assembly.

Early 1991 A structural-adjustment package is agreed with the IMF, involving privatization and liberalization of the market.

May 1991 All political prisoners are released.

Dec 1991 Blaise Compaoré wins the presidential election. This is not surprising since he is the only candidate – 73 per cent of the electorate do not vote.

1993 The IMF lends Burkina $67m for 1993-5 on condition that it continues implementing free-market policies.

June 1993 An official presidential visit to Paris establishes Compaoré as France's favourite ally in West Africa.

Jan 1994 The CFA franc is halved in value in relation to the French franc at the insistence of Paris and the IMF.

March 1994 Compaoré tightens his control, sacking the prime minister to install a loyalist.

A villager's assessment of Compaoré

'France gave Blaise money. I don't know exactly how but they did. And when you have money in Africa you can do anything. The trade unions have been bought off, for example – the President gives them money so that they'll shut their mouths. He's our President, we agreed to that – but his policies come from France. Every order comes from France and he never asks the Assembly's opinion.

'There is no real opposition. Politics here means who will give money. People who want to become ministers or deputies look to develop themselves first and the country after – they all know the Western way of life, they want everything easy. Politics is just a means of becoming rich and giving you a big car. And Blaise gives money to opposition groups so they will divide and, *voilà*, no opposition. Another Sankara simply couldn't arrive out of the current democratic landscape.'

Many wives, one God

A shock next door... Teenage kicks for the patriarch... How does it feel to be a co-wife?... The sky gods win out...

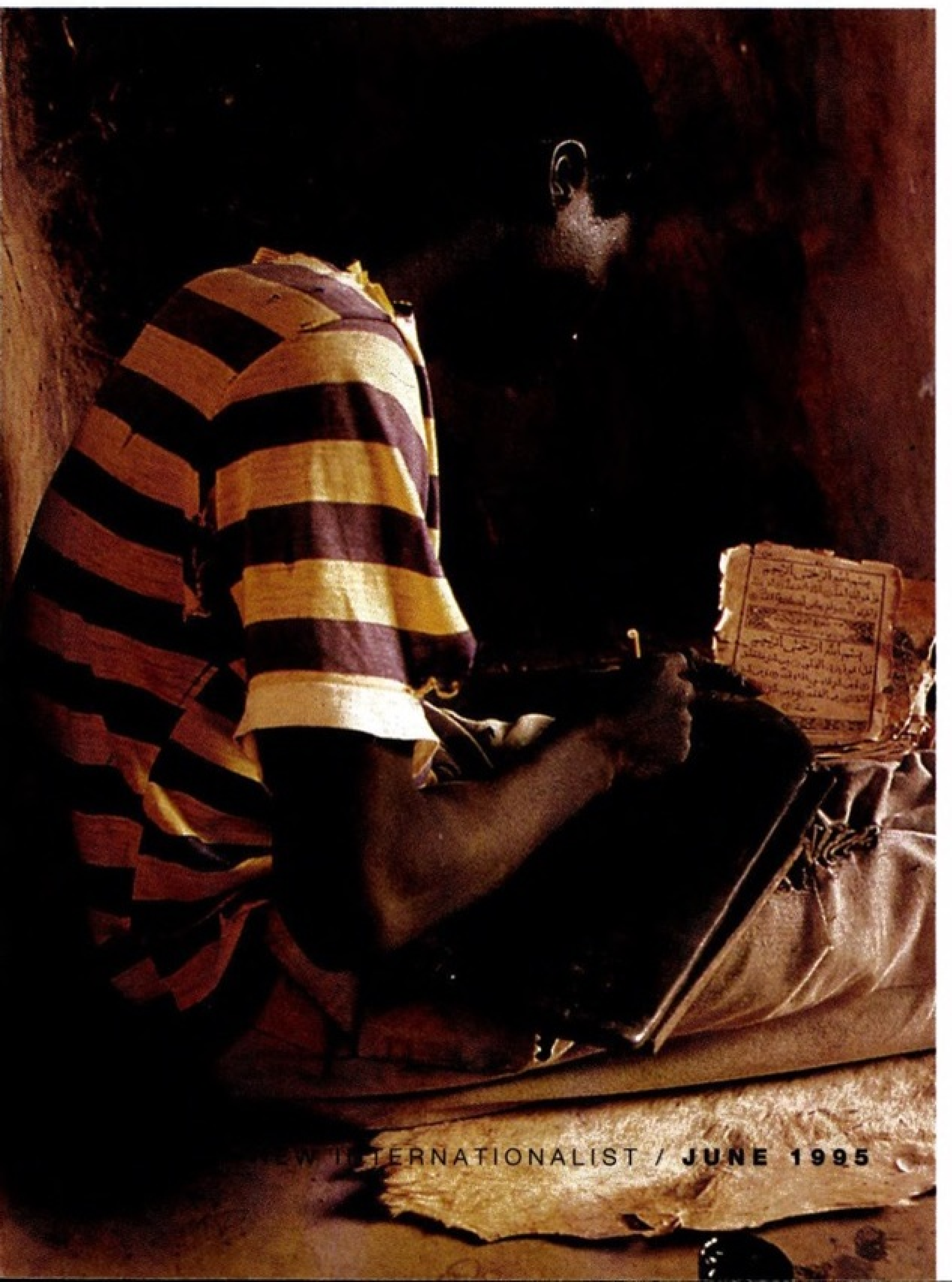
I HAVE been living next door to Zenabou and Adama for a week and have visited their home three times before I discover I have failed to grasp a rather fundamental change in their circumstances: Adama now has four wives instead of two. This emerges when I finally manage to sit a hitherto elusive Adama down for a chat just before his evening prayers. As we talk a young woman I'd previously assumed to be a guest wanders past us and straight into his new mud-brick house. This seems a bit familiar so I lean over to ask him who she is. I am flabbergasted by the answer.

Somehow even knowing you're in a polygamous society, the fact of it is difficult to absorb – I am rarely anything but genuinely surprised when a man tells me how many wives he has. It's a conception of marriage and the relationship between the sexes so completely different from our own that it is hard to credit. And the bigger the number, the harder it is to absorb.

Ten years ago I got used to the idea that Zenabou was one of two wives, and that Mariama was too. Zenabou argued then that polygamy was good for a woman because it provided her with a sister to share the burden of domestic work and childcare. This of course presupposes that the burden is going to fall more on women anyway. And indeed Adama's bald acceptance that women work more than men was the centrepiece of our film: 'I can see for myself that she is tired, that she works too hard. But tradition and habit stop me from helping her. It is a woman's place to do that work. I don't see why I should help her.'

Adama's patriarchal power now seems even more obvious – it is almost as if having more wives allows him to divide and rule along the lines of the old colonial policy. Certainly I have the clear sense that the two older wives, Zenabou and Meryam, are less than entirely happy with the new arrangement.

Adama took his third wife Barkissou six years ago and has two children by her so she has clearly been well absorbed into the family structure. But the fourth wife, Bintu, only arrived last year – and she is still only 16 years old. By Adama's own admission this is a fairly curious marriage. Bintu was offered by her father, one of Adama's friends, to his and Zenabou's oldest son, Hamaru, who is now living in Ouagadougou. But Hamaru turned her down and the way Adama puts it he felt duty bound to take on the poor girl himself. He seems to have got over any sense of fatherly responsibility this might imply: Bintu doesn't even have a bedroom of her own yet but rather spends every night sleeping with Adama, which is highly irregular in this society.



Worshipping the Word: Moussa studies Islam in Adama's house and does odd jobs for his keep.

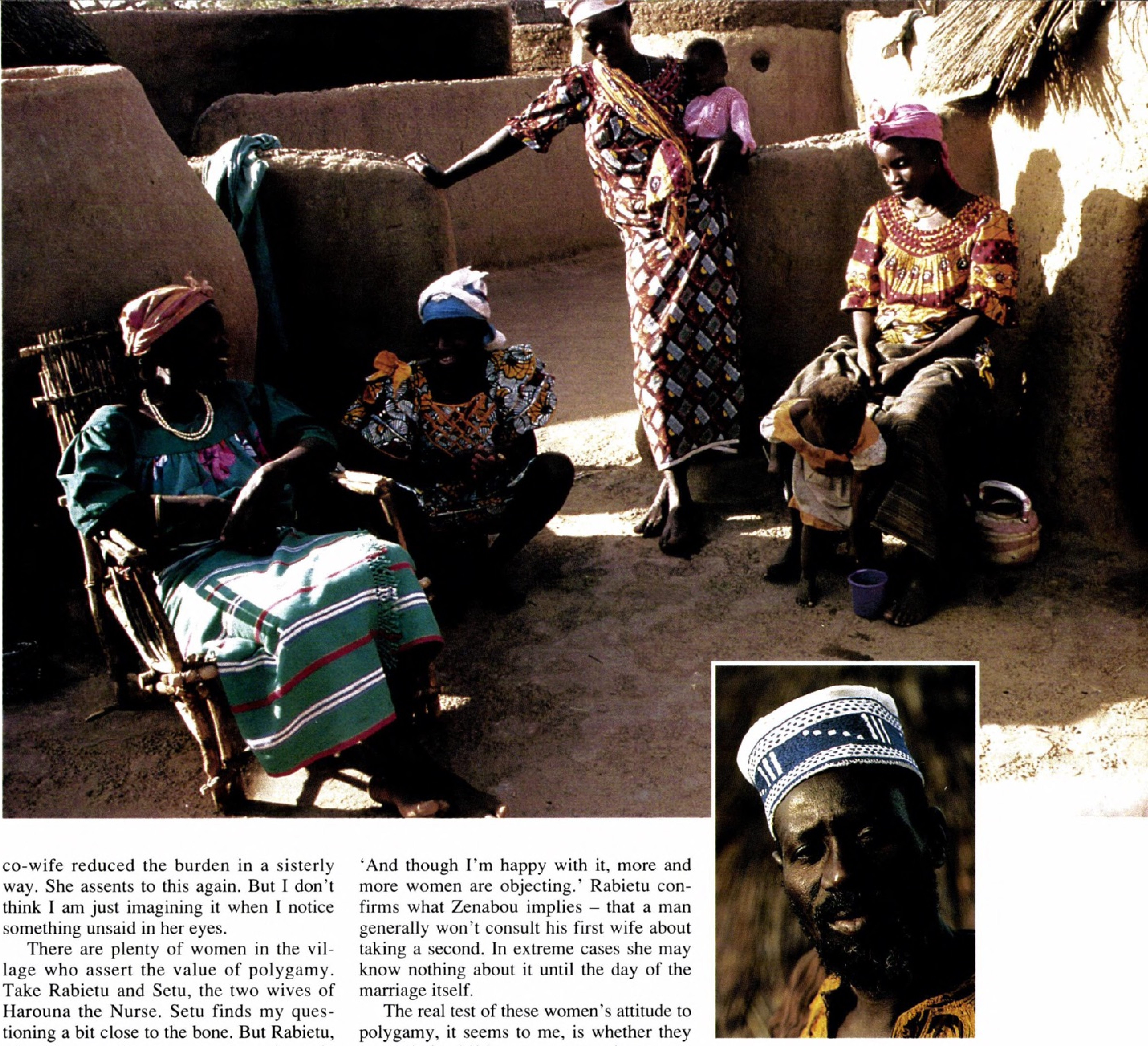
There is some banter amongst the four co-wives about this. Zenabou says outright that the other three have not exactly been swamped with Adama's attentions since Bintu arrived. This is a joke but not one devoid of feeling and it certainly makes Bintu squirm uncomfortably. I ask Bintu how she feels about being married to so old a man (Adama is 52) and she says it is good, that younger men are so silly. Zenabou embarrasses the poor young woman further by telling me that Bintu is in love and it doesn't seem inconceivable – she seems pretty radiant and Adama is a good-looking old rogue.

But marriage in this society is primarily an economic decision. Even if Bintu is in love now, what will have attracted her (or rather her father) to the arrangement is Adama's relative wealth. His 12 oxen are the physical proof that he will be able to offer her economic and food security.

This is also why I am routinely offered teenage daughters in marriage as I go round the village – one of the Chief's five wives, for example, offers me her 15-year-old daughter. I may have a few grey hairs but I would provide wealth beyond their wildest dreams and as such in their view I am wasted on only one partner.

When Zenabou comes to visit me on her own outside my hut in the evening, as she does quite often, I ask her on a more intimate basis how she has felt about this major change in her life. She gives a somewhat less than ringing endorsement of Adama's decision to take two more wives.

I ask if he'd discussed things with her before he'd done it and she says no as if that were a pigs-might-fly eventuality. So men never discuss this with their wives? 'No, never.' I ask if she'd been happy or unhappy about the idea and she says: 'What could I do if I was unhappy about it? Where could I go? You just have to make the best of it.' When I ask how she gets on with her co-wives her response is similar. I remind her that when we'd asked her about this ten years ago she'd said that having a



For richer, for poorer... Adama and the women in his life: Zenabou, Bintu, Meryam and Barkissou.

co-wife reduced the burden in a sisterly way. She assents to this again. But I don't think I am just imagining it when I notice something unsaid in her eyes.

There are plenty of women in the village who assert the value of polygamy. Take Rabietu and Setu, the two wives of Harouna the Nurse. Setu finds my questioning a bit close to the bone. But Rabietu, who is generally more rambunctious, is delighted to rise to my challenge.

So how did she feel about becoming the second wife of a man rather than the one and only? 'It was my destiny. When you're in love that's what matters.' But when you're embarking on such a marriage do you size up the first wife to see if you're going to be able to get on with her? 'It's the man who chooses. It's up to us to sort it out and get on with each other. We're together all the time, after all – we *have* to be the best of friends. She can look after my children while I'm at work. It's like we're children of the same mother.' But what about when your husband is 'with' the other wife – doesn't that hurt? 'We're used to it.' Ah, but how did it feel at the start? (Laughter) 'In the beginning it's tough, it's true, but you get used to it.'

Rabietu is quite tickled by the idea of corresponding with a Western woman about the virtues of polygamy. Nevertheless she thinks the practice will decline over time on economic grounds alone as men recognize they don't need more wives and children just to survive. 'And though I'm happy with it, more and more women are objecting.' Rabietu confirms what Zenabou implies – that a man generally won't consult his first wife about taking a second. In extreme cases she may know nothing about it until the day of the marriage itself.

The real test of these women's attitude to polygamy, it seems to me, is whether they want their children to enter polygamous marriages. Rabietu says she would advise hers against it, if only on economic grounds. Mariama says she'd wanted monogamy for herself but had been given no option. 'There's no way any of my children are going to enter a polygamous marriage.'

She is not likely to encounter the problem with her son Omaru, who is clear he will only marry one woman. That is the view of all the teenage boys and younger men with whom I broach the subject. They see polygamy as an old-fashioned practice which is beginning to die out along with the animist religious traditions of the village.

Why should the old animist beliefs have been eclipsed so completely by Islam and Christianity? You can't put the transformation down to the innate evangelical power of the One God religions – after all, people here proved immune to decades of French colonial education and missionary work.

My own guess is that it's part of the whole package of modernization. The villagers are clear that they need a spiritual dimension to their lives. But the old ways are just not holding: the new religions have an external validation which the old sacrificial rites no longer retain.

The village is gearing up for a big animist funeral when I leave – to mourn the death of one of its most distinguished elders, blind Gyerban, whom I remember well from ten years ago. But it is almost like his funeral is the last hurrah for the old religion. Gyerban's son Raphael, also now blind, was a convert long ago to Catholicism – he built the church and was the rock around which the Christian community in the village grew. But his father remained resolutely animist throughout his life. Until, that is, his final illness, when he agreed to be baptized. Perhaps he was just sensibly hedging his bets in the style of King Charles II, who became a Catholic on his deathbed. But it doesn't seem too fanciful to think of his conversion as the last nail in the coffin of Sabtenga's animism. ■

CHRIS BRAZIER

Lending a hand

This is all very well but how can I help?

THAT may well be the question on your lips as you emerge from this issue of the magazine. Part of the answer lies with the reasons I gave for embarking on this journey: those of us who know that Africa is much more than a continent waiting for the next disaster must spread that word in every area of society. Our media and politicians are only able to assume that the kind of people you have met in this issue do not matter because we the public give our collective consent to such an assumption.

I know changing this seems a long shot. So too does exerting any influence on institutions like the World Bank and the IMF which continue to grind Africa down in our name. But fortunately there is an intermediate stage which helps to make the gulf between African villagers and sympathetic Westerners a touch smaller.

By supporting the most progressive charities with argument as well as money we can contribute to a different, fairer agenda – while at the same time directly helping those villagers who take collective action to change their conditions.

I witness this connection being made in a local women's group. The words 'women's group' do not connote the same as they do in the West. The first time I attend one of their meetings I am frustrated to find myself perched on a chair in front of a crescent of 30 or so women sitting on the floor. But I cannot object without being impolite, since Yacouba the Delegate and the male secretary of the group (who volunteers his time because none of the women are literate) are also on chairs by my side.

These women band together in their free time for very practical reasons. The work they do together is useful and helps supplement the family income – they have started cultivating peanuts in their own field and are working towards buying an ox. But another good reason to form a *groupement villageois* is that it can unlock the door to financial help from outside.

The meeting today, for instance, is debating what to do with a loan from the French agency Afrique Verte – 500,000 francs ($1,000) to be repaid with ten-per-cent interest within ten months, the kind of credit they could never get from a bank. If it were earlier in the season they could buy grain and sell later at a profit. But prices have already soared to what they think will be the ceiling – red sorghum, for instance, has tripled its price in the last three months. So they opt to loan out the money to the members.

I wonder if this is throwing the burden back on individuals rather than shouldering it collectively but there seems to be general agreement that this is the best thing to do. The main organizers of the group are the boldest when it comes to deciding on the size of their loan – Alisieta, the chair (wearing the pink-and-white headdress in the photo), takes 20,000 francs ($40) and so do her lieutenants, but the majority are more cautious, taking only 5,000 or 10,000.

Zenabou is among the few who borrow 20,000 and, as we walk home together, she tells me she knows exactly what she is going to do with it. She is going to travel to Ouagadougou to sell *sumballa* in the Great Market every day for a fortnight. Every three days she cooks up these balls of food – which people buy to use as the basis of the sauce for their evening meal – and walks the four kilometres to Garango to sell them in the market. But she feels she'll be able to sell much more in the capital.

Over the other side of Sabtenga I meet a much more long-established mixed-sex collective which last year won 150,000 francs for being the sixth best *groupement villageois* in the country and received the prize from President Compaoré himself.

These examples of communal action are still in the vanguard, set apart from the normal operation of village life. But the groups are growing in size and quantity all the time, and the more they are seen to be effective the more people will get involved. One of the brightest hopes on Sabtenga's horizon has arisen out of this collective action: a new local organization is being launched in Garango called Association Dakupa, which will work with *groupements* from 25 villages in the area to address their key development needs.

This new organization is part of a worldwide movement – the last five years have seen an explosion of indigenous development groups in the Third World. At first there were only big national agencies such as BRAC in Bangladesh or REST in Tigray – and these received eager support from the best Western charities. But particularly since the Earth Summit there has been a proliferation of smaller, more diverse organizations which are closer to the grassroots. These new organizations are making civil society and democracy more vibrant and resilient wherever they appear.

I have high hopes for Association Dakupa. It is being set up by a Bissa man called Yacouba Zeba who was born and bred in Garango but who has worked with Oxfam UK in Ouagadougou and thus knows the aid business from both ends. Oxfam has provided him with a start-up grant.

I hope this initiative can help make a big difference to the lives of Sabtenga's villagers in the next ten years. And I hope that more and more people here will be able to protect themselves by working collectively as they and their country make their way ever deeper into this modernized, market-led, money-mad world. ■

The NI Interview

Vandana Shiva

Sue Wheat talks to one of the South's leading environmental activists about 'creative non-cooperation'.

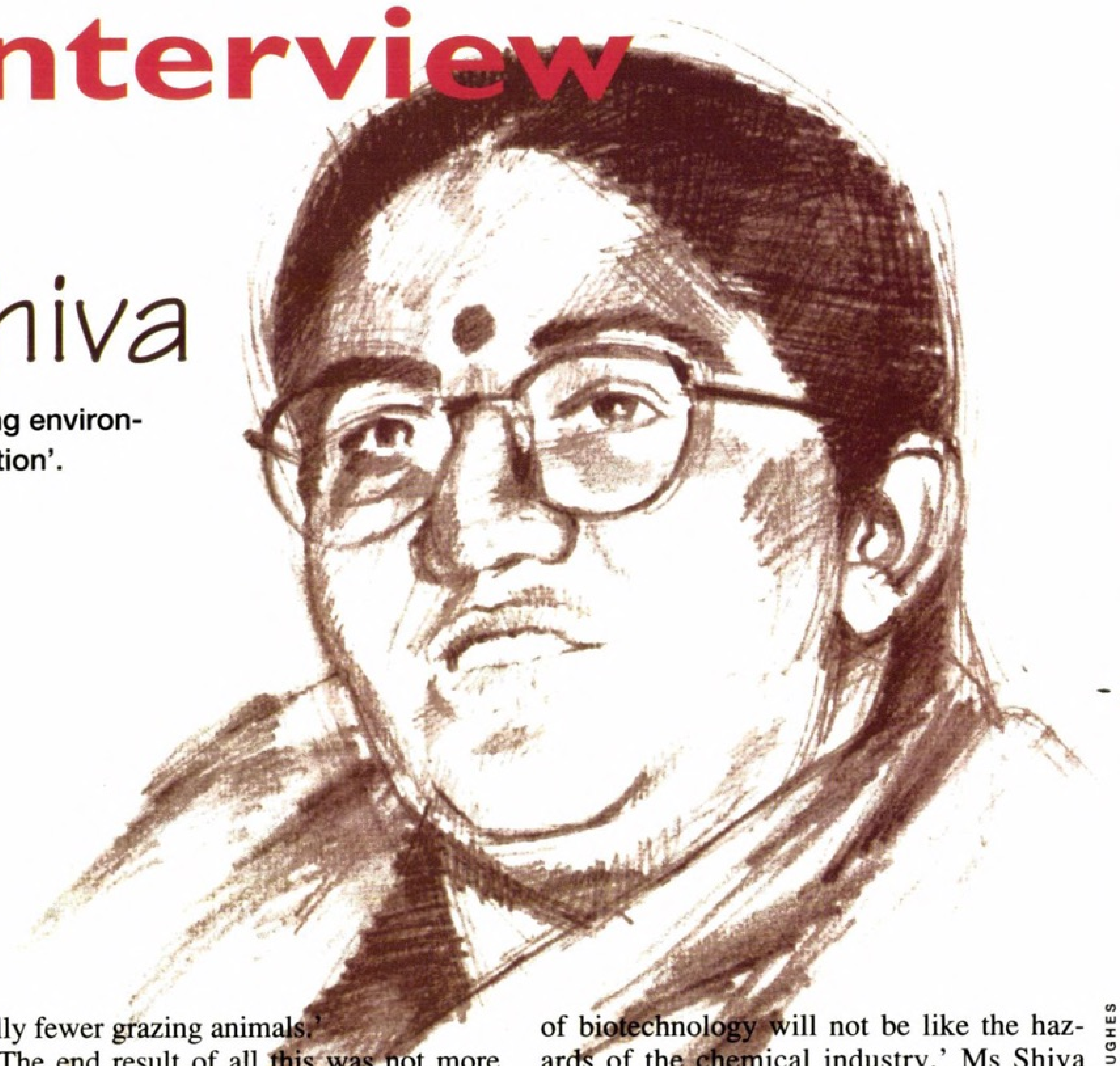


ILLUSTRATION: ALAN HUGHES

Vandana Shiva sits primly in her emerald-green sari, a stack of papers balanced precariously on one knee. She exudes the quiet self-assurance of a confident scholar – not surprising, given her training as a nuclear physicist. In recent years, though, her focus has shifted light years away from the world of quarks and protons. Today she is one of the South's best-known environmentalists.

And it's here where her scientific background comes in handy. She argues with clarity and commitment – defending her views with an array of well-marshalled statistics and examples. Ms Shiva believes that Western society is mesmerized by a dangerous and pervasive myth: the belief that economic growth and the power of technology will inevitably combine to relieve mass poverty.

'Everything we have been taught in contemporary times is that monocultures are necessary, to increase both production and growth. But this kind of thinking is really one-dimensional. It negates our true human and ecological state, which is diversity. And we destroy this at our peril. Let me give you some examples.

'The "Green Revolution" was supposed to bring Western technology to the aid of Third World farmers. But instead of wealth the new high-yielding seeds brought poverty and environmental destruction. These capital-intensive technologies also led to an economic monoculture. Institutions like the World Bank loaned money around the world to every developing country to do the same thing.

'But uniformity is not nature's way; diversity is nature's way,' she explains. Soon, she adds, there was a backlash. 'When Third World farmers began to grow single crops, plants that for centuries had provided communities with essential vitamins were suddenly declared "weeds" and doused with pesticides. In some villages in India blindness increased severely because the so-called "weeds" had been the community's only source of Vitamin A... Genetic changes to shorten the height of grain and increase yield led to a scarcity of straw; that meant less humus, depleted soils and eventually fewer grazing animals.'

The end result of all this was not more but less food. Reducing domestic financial support for farmers will only make it easier for multinational corporations to tighten their grip on global markets.

'Open-door policies,' she says, 'will remove all restrictions on imports and exports, inevitably converting Third World's subsistence food production into a market for big business.' It's not surprising that peasant movements worldwide oppose these kinds of open markets. 'For them, maintaining diversity is a matter of survival. There will be no Indian culture if there are no Indian farmers to regenerate and continue that culture.'

Diversity, she insists, cannot be maintained by foreign corporations whose main aim is optimum yield from one product in order to gain maximum profit. The names of the six corporations that control the global grain trade roll off her tongue: Cargill, Continental Grain, Louis Dreyfus, Bunge, Andre and Mitsui Cook. These companies market the high-yielding seeds that are the heart of the 'Green Revolution'.

Ms Shiva argues that these new seeds are not all they're made out to be. 'In India I've discovered that farmers can grow more grain *and* lose money. In the group of farmers I worked with those planting their own seeds earned 3,000 rupees a year. Others planting Cargill's "new improved" hybrid seed netted only 297 rupees after the harvest because most of their earnings were used to pay for inputs like fertilizer and pesticides.'

Relaxed rules on biotechnology will allow companies to genetically engineer, patent and sell new organisms without having to account for their long-term effects on health or the environment. 'The hazards of biotechnology will not be like the hazards of the chemical industry,' Ms Shiva warns.

Such threats cannot be treated casually. 'Whether it's in the technological or economic domain, we are constantly being tricked into seeing growth where there is actually the production of scarcity. We have become totally numb to what disappears. By flattening the world to economic values we devalue ourselves. We assume there is only one economy – the market place. We forget that people have their own economies – taking care of themselves. Biodiversity is related to cultural diversity because cultures are also systems that renew – systems of value, of perception and of lifestyle. Human beings need a social economy that exchanges things other than money and that produces for reasons other than profits.'

She is working with Indian farmers to re-build seed banks in the hope of strengthening biodiversity. And to pursue sustainable farming techniques without expensive inputs from the agro-chemical companies. But if push comes to shove she argues that creative non-cooperation – 'creating conditions for survival while rejecting an imposed system of authoritarianism' – is the only way forward.

It may seem an impossible task to change such a powerful global system. But Ms Shiva is undaunted. 'It's not the first time we have tried to change a global system. Fifty years ago people were doing it all over the world and they succeeded. That time the political system was the colonial empires of Europe. When small steps are taken by large numbers of people momentous things can happen.' ■

Vandana Shiva is Director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource in Dehradun, India.

Reviews

film

Hoop Dreams

directed by **Steve James, Frederick Marx** and **Peter Gilbert**

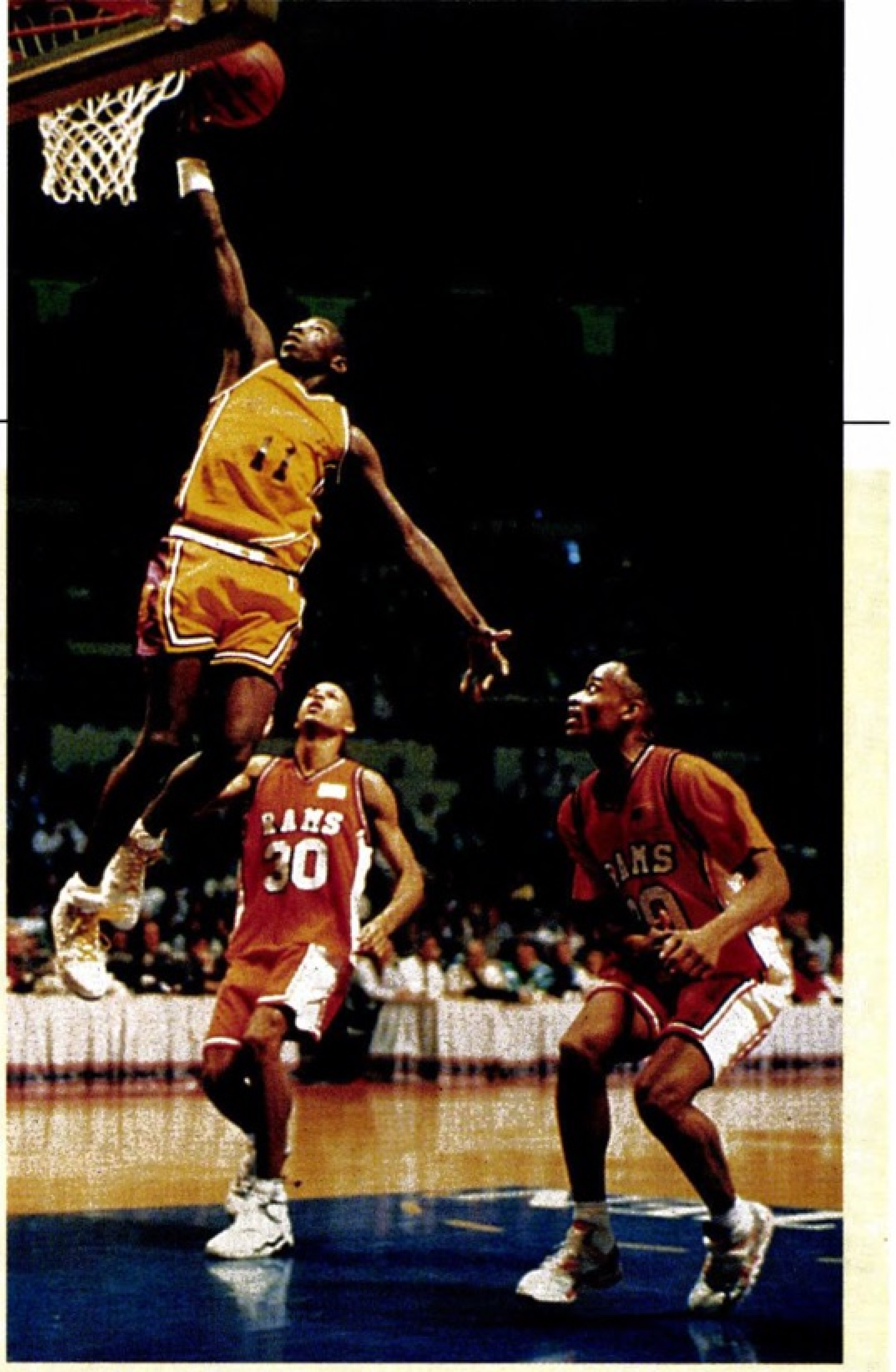
IT'S NOT often you see a documentary in a commercial movie theatre and don't even realize that three hours have gone by the time it's over. It's not often you can even see a documentary in a commercial theatre at all. That is what makes **Hoop Dreams** so exceptional. While the film is not destined to be *numero uno* at the local cinema it is drawing respectable audiences in its North American run.

It traces the lives of two inner-city Chicago kids, William Gates and Arthur Agee, from ages 14 to 19. Both boys dream of playing in the National Basketball Association – their escape out of 'the projects' (Chicago's high-rise slums). The film reveals the workings of the high-powered basketball machine that pulls kids out of the playgrounds and moulds them through pressure-cooker competition to become 'shooters', first in high school, then college and finally at the professional level.

Hoop Dreams exposes the racism embedded in a system that treats young black boys as so much meat to serve up at courtside to hungry fans. The cast of characters – condescending school bureaucrats, obsessive coaches and hawk-eyed talent scouts – reveal themselves on camera in ways that actors playing fictional characters could only aspire to. Racism and the ideology of exploitation are always presented as 'in the boys best interests'. But the film doesn't stop there – it is also a multi-layered and sensitive portrait of two quite different personalities and the ways in which they each deal with the stressed-out world of high-stakes basketball.

The other thing about **Hoop Dreams** is that it is exciting. The directors have taken 250 hours of films that span five years and woven them into a compelling mix of life-stories, unforgettable characters and dramatic fast-paced action around the basket. The film ends up giving the viewer that rare sense that they have touched both people's lives and an important social truth. It is a comment on the present-day obsessions of the US that even liberal Hollywood did not bother to nominate **Hoop Dreams** for an academy award for the best documentary category this year.

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆☆



Hoop Dreams: boys served up as meat for hungry fans.

music

Clube da Esquina and Clube da Esquina 2

by **Milton Nascimento**

(Hemisphere /EMI 7243 8 322 59 2 7 and 7243 8 32260 2 3)

AS INTERNATIONAL INTEREST in the interface between regional and cross-cultural music grows, these are two timely re-releases from Brazil's *tropicalista* master, Milton Nascimento. *Tropicalista* was a loosely-knit musical force that began in the early 1960s, in the face of increasingly right-wing, repressive and nationalistic Brazilian politics. It looked outwards, combining strong regional influences – in Nascimento's case from his native state of Minas Gerais – with orchestrations and attitudes taken from Western rock music.

In these two 'Corner Club' albums, dating from 1972 and 1978, the streams of folk and indigenous music that flow through Nascimento's work meet some unusual currents. String arrangements from the George Martin-era Beatles, fuzzy wah-wah guitars and jazzy elements are brought into the mix, making any hard-and-fast classification difficult.

But above all this floats Nascimento's captivating voice. For the most part he uses a high, lyrical tenor that glides across his melodies and which is warm and emotive. The imagery of his lyrics is densely metaphorical and benefits from his deft ability to turn a light phrase into something far more shadowy.

Nascimento has been a vociferous supporter of those people who are under-represented in his society, particularly Blacks, Indians and the poor. On the second album, the song *Casamiento de Negros* (Wedding of the Blacks) makes a poetic equation around the colour black, connecting the plight of the Brazilian Blacks with various black objects: hair, earth, charcoal. In *Pão e Agua* (Bread and Water) the millstone of the granary becomes symbolic of both poverty and the wheel of life. In *Canción por la Unidad de Latino America* (Song for the Unity of Latin America) he speaks of his subcontinent's wholeness at the beginning of time and how political and geographic barriers have turned peoples into strangers. Many of the songs have a gently religious dimension and there is a clear dichotomy between what is natural and vital (earth, fire, human beings) and the artificial and deadening (Brazilian politics in the 1970s, for example).

One major source of frustration with these albums, however, is that there are no translations of the lyrics. Even so, there is much to enjoy in Nascimento's weaving rhythms and his warm and sonorous vocal style.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

MILTON
NASCIMENTO
LÔ BORGES
CLUBE DA ESQUINA
HEMISPHERE
CLUBE DA ESQUINA 2
milton nascimento
HEMISPHERE

books

Rebel Radio

by José Ignacio López Vigil

(Latin American Bureau ISBN 0 906156 88 2)

The trouble with the written word is that you can get caught in possession of it. If you lived in a place like El Salvador during the 1980s books, pamphlets or leaflets of the wrong kind, found anywhere near you during the military repression, could bring instant arrest or summary execution.

Radio, on the other hand, leaves no apparent trace of what you have heard. The trouble with it is that this is often not worth hearing. Unless, that is, you lived in El Salvador during the 1980s, when the 'pirate' station of the resistance, *Radio Venceremos,* crackled onto the airwaves to bring you programmes that could sound like this:

'At this very moment we are advancing on Meanguera... It's five in the morning and it's barely...'

'Shhhhh! Shut up! You're going to give us away.'

'At this very moment the *compañeros* ask for silence, because we're only a few metres from...'

'Shut your trap, you idiot!'

José Ignacio López Vigil, the narrator of this enchanting tale, originally planned to make films in El Salvador, but he found himself reporting for *Radio Venceremos* after he helped to smuggle an ancient transmitter into the country from Mexico. He had a tough apprenticeship, trying out the draft script of his first broadcast on *compañero* Santiago:

'He read it, crumpled it up and threw it on the ground. "That's a piece of shit. Start again."

'"A piece of shit?"

'"That's right. A shit sandwich."

'"Why is it no good, might I ask?"

'"It's no good because it's no good... nothing but hot air."'

What follows is a saga that takes you through some of the cruellest moments of El Salvador's history. It is told with the zest, humanity and flight of fancy that somehow only Latin American writing at its best seems able to convey – even when, as the fighting stops, *Radio Venceremos* starts playing Madonna.

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆☆

STAR RATING

Excellent	☆☆☆☆☆
Very good	☆☆☆☆
Good	☆☆☆
Fair	☆☆
Poor	☆

Reviews editor: **Vanessa Baird**

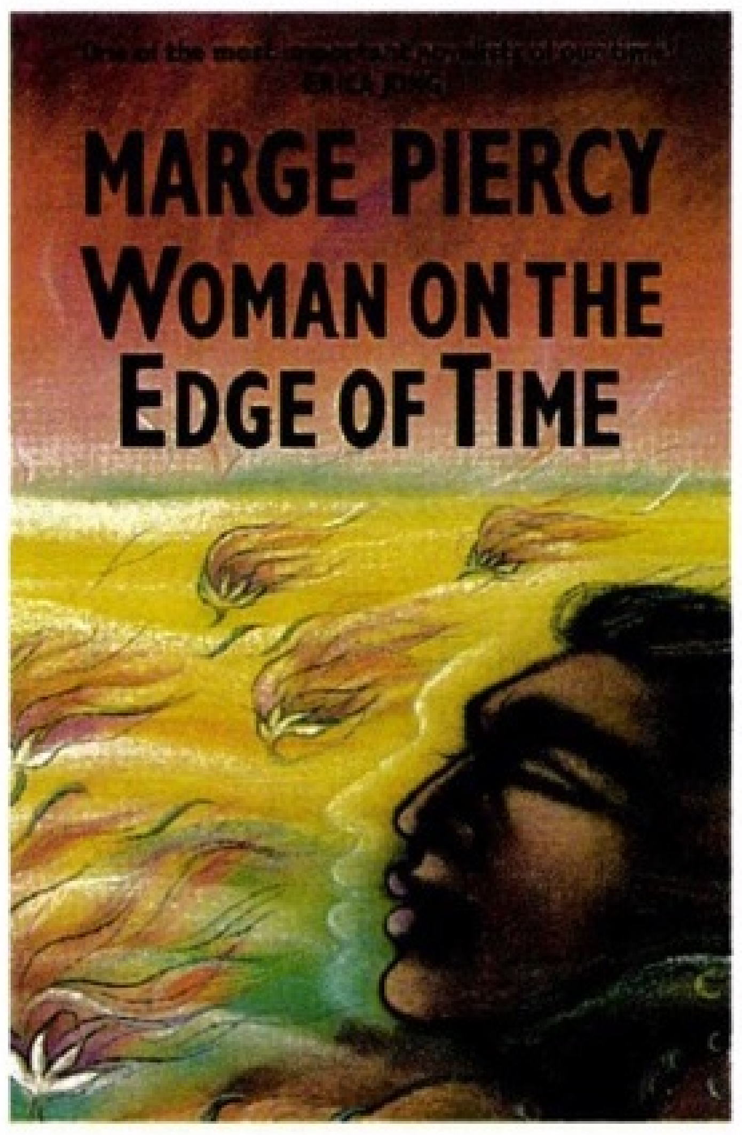
THE **CLASSIC**

Woman on the Edge of Time

...being the book that co-opted for feminism the genre of science fiction.

'The anger of the weak never goes away... it just gets a little mouldy. It moulds like a beautiful blue cheese in the dark, growing stronger and more interesting. The poor and weak die with all their anger and probably those angers go on growing in the dark of the grave like the hair and the nails.'

These are the thoughts of Connie Ramos, the indomitable heroine of Marge Piercy's 1976 novel **Woman on the Edge of Time**. Connie is the epitome of powerlessness. She is beaten up by her husband and her niece's pimp; the authorities take away her daughter and she is unjustly locked in a mental institution, disbelieved, drugged and degraded. But Connie has an ability that her tormentors cannot begin to imagine: she is a 'catcher' who can communicate with the future and is in telepathic contact with the inhabitants of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, in the year 2137. While her body remains in the asylum, her spirit visits the village and she discovers that twenty-second-century humanity has tackled the root cause of many of society's ills. People live in close harmony with the natural world, recycle and reuse everything, don't use money and have changed both their language and their behaviour to eliminate sexist terms and sex discrimination. Children are 'born' mechanically and each has 'three' mothers who may be male or female and any of them may breastfeed the child.



At first Connie exhibits entirely understandable scepticism at this green-feminist utopia but as she makes more and more visits to Mattapoisett, helped by Luciente, her guide from the future, she begins to realize that this world is not only sane and beautiful – it is also under threat. Potentialities in the past may mean that the revolution that brought about this pastoral and communal way of life never happened and its time will simply 'wink out' of existence, to be replaced by a nightmare society in which technology and totalitarianism have triumphed.

Connie realizes that she has a part to play in preventing this catastrophe and, despite the overwhelming odds, she makes a declaration of war on all those who have controlled her life. With Luciente's aid, she escapes and lives wild for a time. When she is recaptured, she is forced into a bizarre and barbaric experiment in which electrodes are implanted in her brain to manage her emotions. Despite this she succeeds in making even more frequent visits to the future and, at the end of the book, inflicts a terrible revenge on her captors.

Marge Piercy was born in Detroit in 1936 and was actively involved in the US Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. She has long been a feisty and articulate supporter of the women's movement. **Woman on the Edge of Time** was her first venture into science fiction. She has since written a technological dystopia novel, *Body of Glass,* as well as several 'generational' sagas dealing with women's lives. There is also the successful, but to my mind ponderous, *Gone to Soldiers* – a consideration of the impact of the Second World War on the lives of women. But in **Woman on the Edge of Time**, her most famous book, she has deftly co-opted the conventions of the SF genre to convey a message about exploitation of women and the possibility for change in the present.

Judged purely as a novel, **Woman on the Edge of Time** is far from perfect. It is over-didactic, loosely plotted and starkly moralistic. The doctors and nurses in the mental institution are excessively malign and the inhabitants of Mattapoisett infuriatingly balanced and rational. If you aren't keen on science fiction, you will probably be irritated as much by the invented language of the future as by the whole concept of time-travel. However, Marge Piercy succeeds brilliantly in pitting the imagined idealism of the future against the poisoned and despoiled present – each illuminating the other – and the book stands as one of the classic feminist utopias, alongside Ursula le Guin's *Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man.* In Connie and Luciente we have two wonderfully rounded characters, fallible, often wrong-headed but brave, full of spirit and immensely life-affirming. Reading **Woman on the Edge of Time** 20 years after its publication is a little like travelling in time ourselves: it speaks to us from a turbulent, optimistic decade, when the phrase 'ideological baggage' wasn't a term of abuse; a time of hope for feminism, of alternatives, of possibilities. If Connie Ramos, in her asylum bed, battered and abused, can find the resourcefulness and inner strength to fight back against her oppressors then perhaps we too, marooned in the corporate twilight of the late twentieth century, can rediscover both the hope and the wherewithal to begin the fightback. ■

Peter Whittaker

***Woman on the Edge of Time** by **Marge Piercy** is published by Alfred Knopf, US, 1976 and The Women's Press, UK, 1979.*

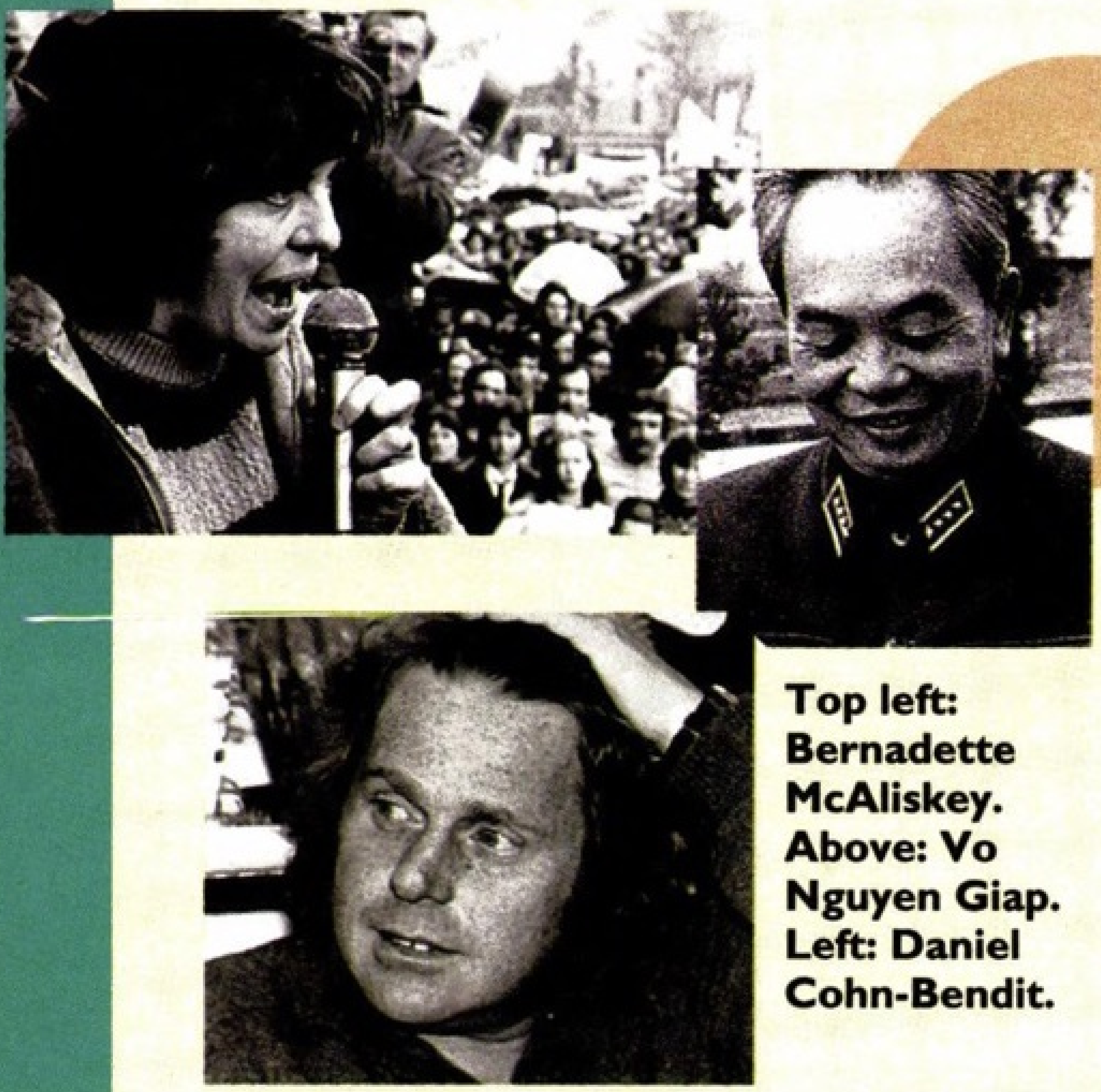
Curiosities

QUESTIONS THAT HAVE ALWAYS INTRIGUED YOU ABOUT THE WORLD WILL APPEAR IN THIS, YOUR SECTION, AND BE ANSWERED BY OTHER READERS. PLEASE ADDRESS YOUR ANSWERS AND QUESTIONS TO 'CURIOSITIES'.

What are revolutionaries such as Leila Khaled, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Bernadette Devlin, Vo Nguyen Giap, Bobby Seale, Abu Nidal and Wadi Haddad doing now?

● I have no knowledge of the whereabouts of the majority of those mentioned but I can speak about Bernadette Devlin, now Bernadette McAliskey.

Largely because of her independent mind and unwillingness to toe party lines, Bernadette has never risen to prominence in any formal political grouping. She has, however, been working tirelessly and selflessly on issues of human rights and social justice over the last quarter of a century. She has been at the forefront of campaigns on prisoners' issues, against discrimination in employment, and against sectarianism and repression. Her energy and dedication never falter.



Top left: Bernadette McAliskey. Above: Vo Nguyen Giap. Left: Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

Her commitment to justice and democracy has cost her dear: she was seriously injured in a murder bid against her and her husband while they lay sleeping, and remains disabled from her injuries. She and her family – demonized, marginalized and censored by the state whose injustice they oppose – live in a small council house in Coalisland in Northern Ireland.

Bernadette jokingly refers to herself now as one of the few middle-aged revolutionaries and by current form intends to continue the struggle for another 25 years if necessary.

Dr Anne McCloskey
Derry, Northern Ireland

● In 1980 General Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been Defence Minister since 1945, was sacked in a purge of pro-Chinese members of the Vietnamese cabinet. He retained his Politburo position and was given the portfolio for family planning. In 1987, however, he returned to the wider political and diplomatic scene after he was sworn in as Deputy Prime Minister. In August 1994 he visited Italy as a guest of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS). The series of meetings with various luminaries was designed to celebrate and reinforce relations between Hanoi and the Left in Italy. He still happily grants interviews in French and is deeply respected in Hanoi.

David Roberts
Stafford, England

● Daniel Cohn-Bendit is now a Member of the European Parliament for the German Greens.

Susan Pomeroy
Harpenden, England

How did human beings learn to take hard, inedible seeds, grind them up, mix them with water and cook them to get something they could eat?

● All such crafts for living were learned by initiate priests in megalithic times through inspiration. Stone circles and dolmens were built as places where priests could work. At certain times when the sun forces had particular qualities, the priest would give himself over to its spiritual power and make himself aware of a specific need, such as how to make hard seeds edible. Thus earthly experience and cosmic knowledge could unite to reveal wisdom, through which the needs of human beings could be met.

John Marking
Forest Row, England

AWAITING YOUR ANSWERS

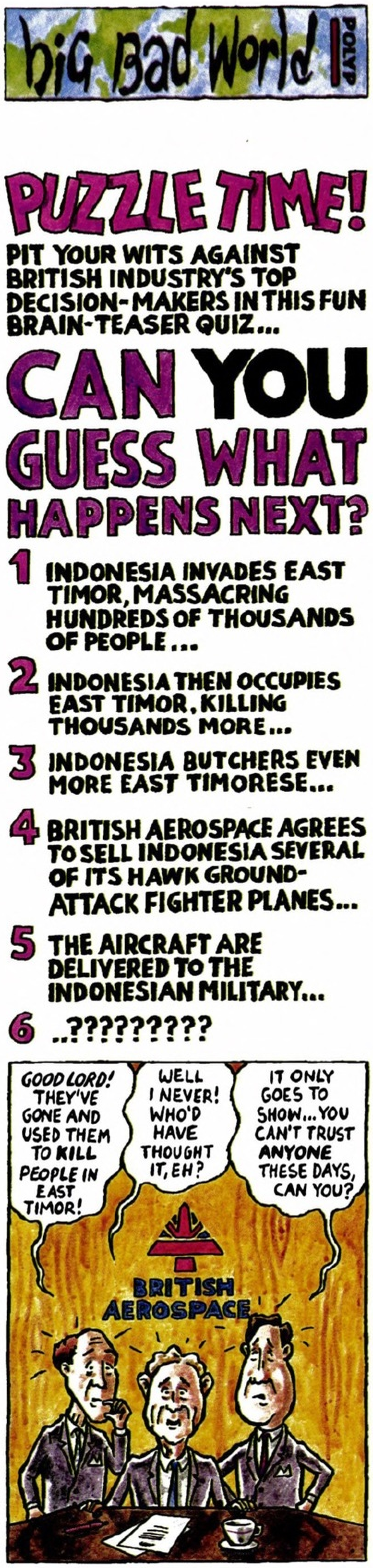
When visiting England last year I found the population debate was all about 'enabling women in the Third World' to have fewer children. I find England overpopulated. What's to be done about it?

Mark Collet
Lake Okareka, Aotearoa/New Zealand

The February 1995 issue of NI informed us that 1999 will be the International Year of Ageing. What other themes are planned for 1996, 1997 and 1998?

Andrew Leigh
Pennant Hills
Australia

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR ANSWERS PLEASE SEND THEM TO **CURIOSITIES, NEW INTERNATIONALIST, 55 RECTORY ROAD, OXFORD OX4 1BW, UK,** OR TO YOUR LOCAL NI OFFICE (SEE INSIDE FRONT COVER FOR ADDRESSES).

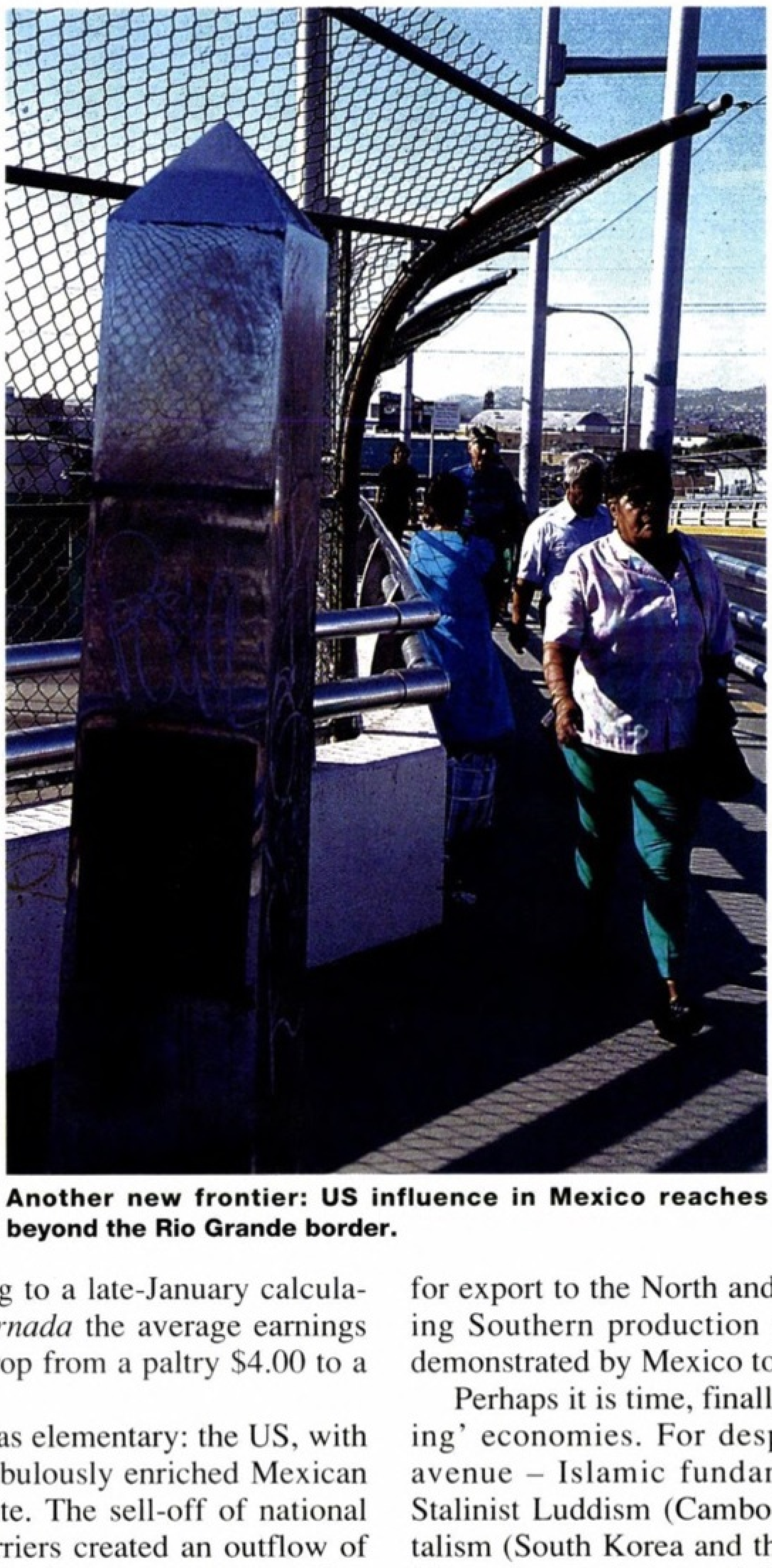

big Bad World
POLYP
PUZZLE TIME!
PIT YOUR WITS AGAINST BRITISH INDUSTRY'S TOP DECISION-MAKERS IN THIS FUN BRAIN-TEASER QUIZ...
CAN YOU GUESS WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?
1 INDONESIA INVADES EAST TIMOR, MASSACRING HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE...
2 INDONESIA THEN OCCUPIES EAST TIMOR, KILLING THOUSANDS MORE...
3 INDONESIA BUTCHERS EVEN MORE EAST TIMORESE...
4 BRITISH AEROSPACE AGREES TO SELL INDONESIA SEVERAL OF ITS HAWK GROUND-ATTACK FIGHTER PLANES...
5 THE AIRCRAFT ARE DELIVERED TO THE INDONESIAN MILITARY...
6 ..????????
GOOD LORD! THEY'VE GONE AND USED THEM TO KILL PEOPLE IN EAST TIMOR!
WELL I NEVER! WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT IT, EH?
IT ONLY GOES TO SHOW... YOU CAN'T TRUST ANYONE THESE DAYS, CAN YOU?
BRITISH AEROSPACE

The New Conquistadors

The evaporation of an economic model in Mexico shows that 'emerging' countries are not waving but drowning, argues Steve Eckardt.

On the final day of January President Clinton issued an emergency $20 billion facility to back the Mexican peso, bypassing Congress in an anti-constitutional move unprecedented in peacetime.

The day before – already 40 days after the peso devaluation of 20 December – the Mexican stock market (the Bolsa) had fallen yet again, while the peso had hit a new record low. The Bolsa had already lost half its value in just 11 days between devaluation and the end of 1994. Mexico, with billions of dollars in short-term loan payments due within a month, was by the end of January 1995 a hair's breadth away from complete default.



Another new frontier: US influence in Mexico reaches beyond the Rio Grande border.

DAVID RANSOM

Behind US anxiety about Mexico lay an even more profound concern about the fragility of the international exchange system itself. Hence a dramatic late-January public gathering, before President Clinton's announcement, of all the neurologically living US Presidents, along with every Secretary of State and Treasury Secretary from the past 20 years – the political equivalent of going nuclear – to demand enactment of the 'Mexican Bail-Out', then unexpectedly mired in Congress.

When Wall Street catches a cold, of course, thousands of people in the Third World die of pneumonia. Sure enough, early in the crisis Mexican leaders announced a program of sweeping privatizations and an austerity plan to hold down wages.

'Privatization' in Mexico means offering up to the northern New Conquistadors the remainder of the already-plundered national patrimony: banks, airports, seaports, roads, rail lines and electric utilities. Loose formulations like 'holding down wage increases' cover the gutting of already low living standards. According to a late-January calculation by the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* the average earnings of 60 per cent of the population will drop from a paltry $4.00 to a desperate $2.82 per day.

The immediate cause of the crisis was elementary: the US, with the collaboration of the quisling and fabulously enriched Mexican élite, had simply bled the country white. The sell-off of national industries and the removal of trade barriers created an outflow of money – a 'balance of payments deficit' – so gargantuan that monies due were nearly 10 times greater than the cash available to pay them. The plunder had left nothing standing behind the national currency.

Yet the solution offered to the crisis caused by plundering Mexico is... deeper plundering of Mexico. Billions in tribute will be sent to the North for the right to pay onerous interest on massive new loans. All revenues from oil reserves – the last jewel in Mexico's crown – will be sent directly to Wall Street. And the common people will draw their belts several notches tighter – if they have belts to tighten.

However bloodied from the recent débacle, US capital is gripped by the relentless demands for profit – despite knowing that another disaster looms. There are, according to a *Chicago Tribune* editorial, 'deep concerns about whether... Mexicans will accept a lower standard of living without political or social protest'.

The peso's collapse coincided with the effortless taking of towns and cities by the Zapatista rebels in the southernmost state of Chiapas in mid-December. Despite the overwhelming presence of a quarter of the Mexican army, the rebels were able to seize territory and disappear without a single casualty. Strikes and major demonstrations have met the new demands of the deepening Conquest, especially following the Government's massive – yet abortive – military operation against the Zapatistas in February and March.

The press coverage in the US has all but disappeared. Yet even the most optimistic economists promise nothing more than 'a very bad year' for Mexico. A profound structural weakness in existing economic relations has been uncovered. Driven by a classical 'crisis of over-production', the nations of the First World are impelled into ever-fiercer competition for inadequate – indeed shrinking – markets. Within their own countries, rulers target the social benefits and democratic rights of the working classes to gain competitive advantage.

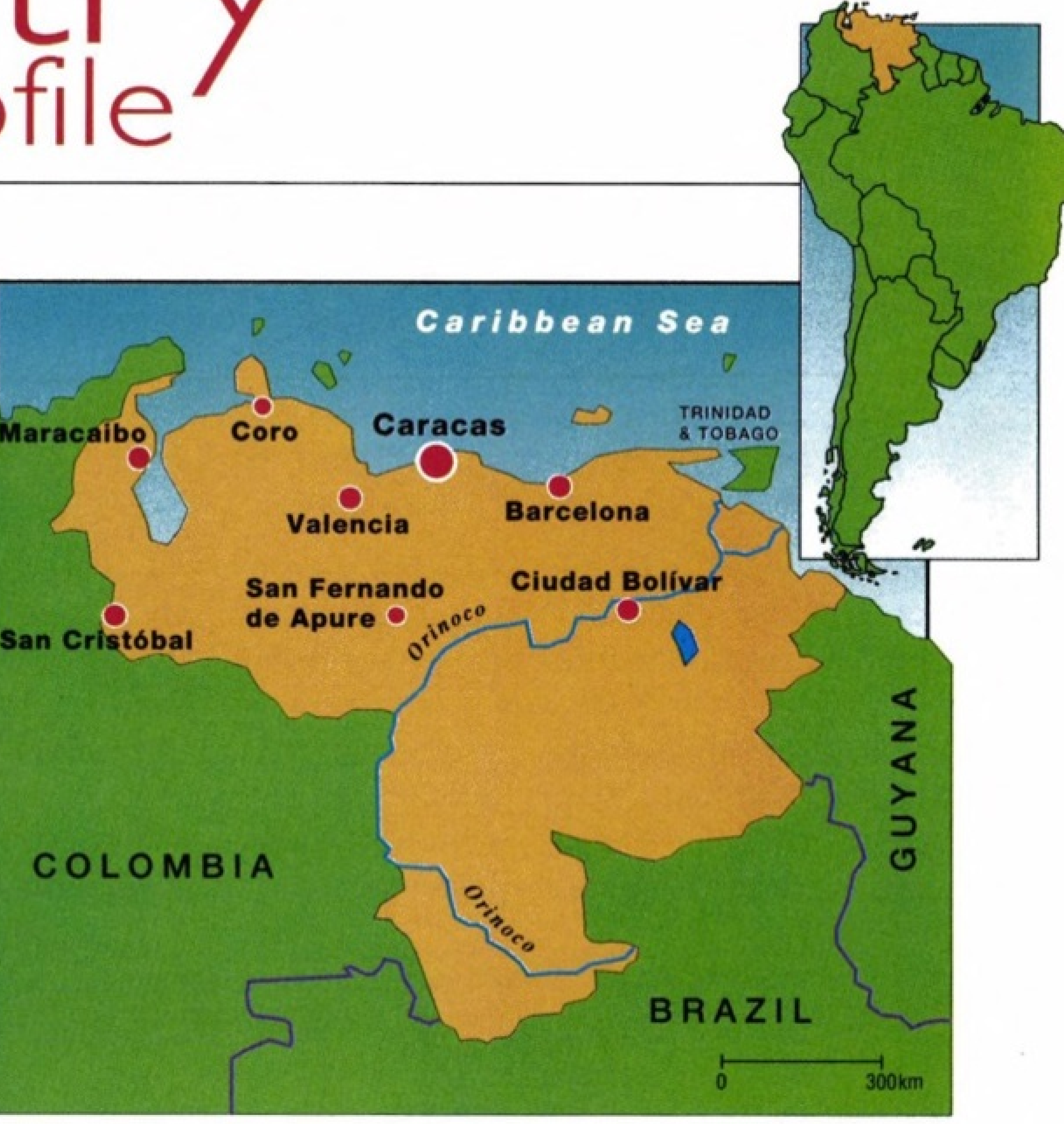
Simultaneously the imperial powers bulldoze headlong into the Third World, seizing markets and enforcing austerity – thereby freeing up cash for export to the North and lowering labor costs for their burgeoning Southern production facilities. In short, precisely the road demonstrated by Mexico to lead to disaster.

Perhaps it is time, finally, to write off the whole idea of 'emerging' economies. For despite the pursuit of every conceivable avenue – Islamic fundamentalism (Iran), reformism (Haiti), Stalinist Luddism (Cambodia), low-wage authoritarian state capitalism (South Korea and the other 'Asian Tigers'), exceptionalism (the vast populations of China and India, the oil reserves in the Middle East), and countless cases of toadyism (Poland, Egypt, Mexico) – not a single Third World nation has so far 'emerged' into the First. In fact the Third World is not emerging at all: it is, like Mexico, submerging. ■

Steve Eckardt is a Chicago-based freelance writer specializing in Mexico and is a regular contributor to India's news weekly *New Wave*.

Country profile

Venezuela



At night Caracas looks fantastic. From the modern, high-rise centre the surrounding hillsides seem festooned with what look like twinkling Christmas lights. By day the sight is less festive. The steep mountain sides are covered with a dense network of *ranchos*, the ramshackle slums which encircle the city. Over a million of the capital's four million people live in the precarious and violent shanty towns. In 1994 hundreds were killed or injured when a hurricane washed their shacks down the hillsides.

The *rancheros* are the most visible casualties of Venezuela's economic decline. Once the wealthiest country in Latin America, its huge oil exports paid for its transformation from a sleepy, coffee-exporting backwater into a brash consumer society. In the 1970s the Middle East crisis and the rise of OPEC brought a windfall of petrodollars, filling government coffers and private pockets.

In the heyday of 'Saudi Venezuela' the country was the world's largest per-capita importer of Scotch whisky. Peasants abandoned their villages to enjoy the bright lights. Migrants from Colombia and other countries poured in, hoping that something would trickle down to them. The ranchos spread around the glittering city centre.

In 1983 the party abruptly ended. Falling oil prices coincided with high interest rates on the huge debts which the Government had incurred during the boom. The *bolívar* was devalued, the economy sank into recession, unemployment and food prices rocketed. More than a decade later, Venezuela is still struggling with austerity measures and a massive foreign debt.

The other casualty of the economic crisis was the two-party political structure which had brought stability to the country since the end of military rule in 1958. Oil money lubricated a system in which the parties alternated in government, rewarding their supporters with jobs and subsidies. For as long as the coffers were full the system worked. A large middle class enjoyed a good standard of living, while the political élite hoarded millions in their Miami bank accounts.

The crash derailed the gravy train. Four years after his election on an anti-corruption ticket, President Carlos Andrés Pérez was impeached on charges of embezzling 250 million *bolívares*. Two attempted coups in 1992 rocked Venezuela's image of stability. Voters rejected the traditional parties and elected an old-style populist, Rafael Caldera, who promised better times. Within months of his election Venezuela's banking system began to unravel, revealing endemic corruption in government and financial circles.

Despite other natural resources, oil still rules in Venezuela. Under pressure from the IMF to break up the state monopoly, the Government is inviting foreign prospectors and producers into joint ventures. In Lake Maracaibo, where oil slicks escape from corroded pipes, the pumps work around the clock. In the jungle of Guyana and offshore the search for new fields continues. But few Venezuelans believe that the good old days can return. Some estimates suggest that 60 per cent of people are living in poverty, and crime has become an epidemic. Looking up at the menacing masses of ranchos, the wealthy few dread the day when the poor descend from the hills in search of a long-gone fortune. ■

James Ferguson

AT A GLANCE

ALAN LEADLEY

Leader President Rafael Caldera (formerly president 1969-73)

Economy GDP per capita $2,800 (US $22,240)

Monetary unit: bolívar

Main exports: petroleum (80%), metals

Main imports: machinery, transport equipment

External debt: $38 billion (1994)

Despite attempts to diversify, oil remains the dominant export. Agriculture was neglected as Venezuela became a 91-per-cent urban society; many staples are imported.

People 20.7 million. Population growth rate 2.6% per annum.

Health Infant mortality 35 per 1,000 live births (US 9 per 1,000).

Culture Population mostly descended from Spanish, Italian and Portuguese immigrants. Afro-Venezuelans make up about nine per cent of the population. There are 27 distinct indigenous groups, numbering about 250,000 people.

Religion: Roman Catholic; several popular 'cults' and evangelical churches.

Languages: Spanish; 21 separate indigenous languages are spoken.

***Sources:** World Bank; UNDP; Third World Guide 93/94; Economist Intelligence Unit; Latin American Monitor.*

Previously profiled April 1985

NI star rating

EXCELLENT	★★★★★
GOOD	★★★★
FAIR	★★★
POOR	★★
APPALLING	★

STAR RATINGS

INCOME DISTRIBUTION

★★★

Extensive poverty partly offset by price subsidies. A large middle class.

1985 ★★

SELF-RELIANCE

★★

Over-dependence on oil exports means too many goods are imported.

1985 ★★

POSITION OF WOMEN

★★★

Some progressive legislation and career opportunities available. But *machismo* remains rife.

1985 ★★

LITERACY

★★★★

62% (1985-90). Adult literacy is estimated at 89%. But austerity measures are cutting the education budget.

1985 ★★★★

FREEDOM

★★★

Mostly free media, but police and military deal violently with demonstrations.

1985 ★★★

LIFE EXPECTANCY

★★★★

Men 67, women 73.

1985 ★★★

POLITICS

NI ASSESSMENT ★★★

Shaken by corruption scandals, attempted coups and social unrest, the Government is becoming more authoritarian. But so far democracy has survived, with a thriving new left-wing party, Causa R, making important gains.

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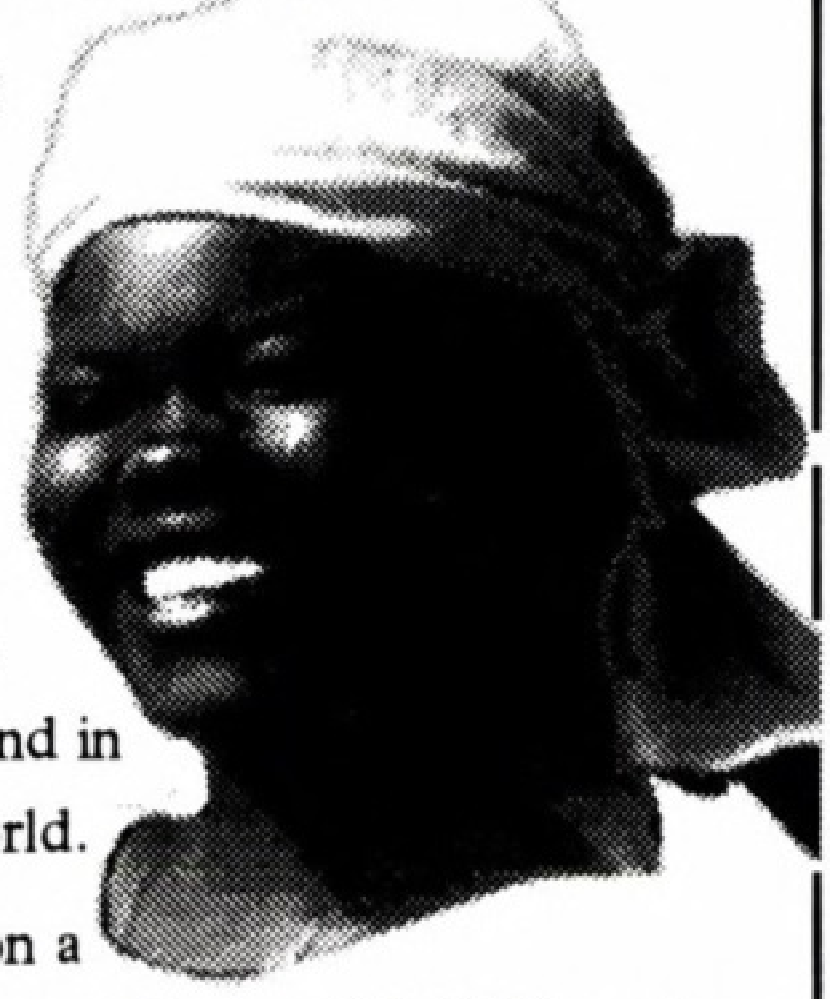

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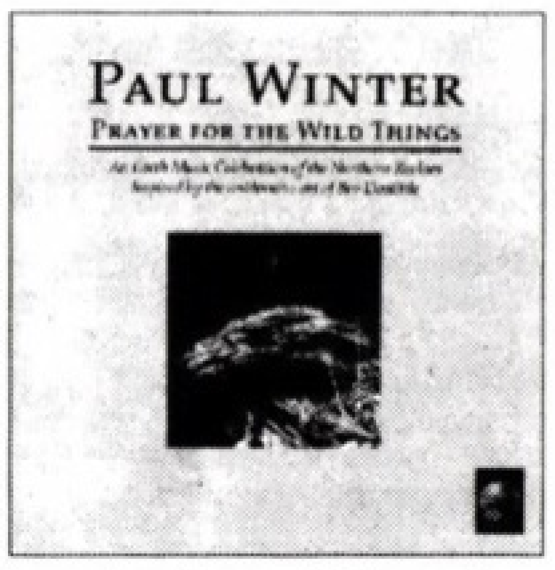

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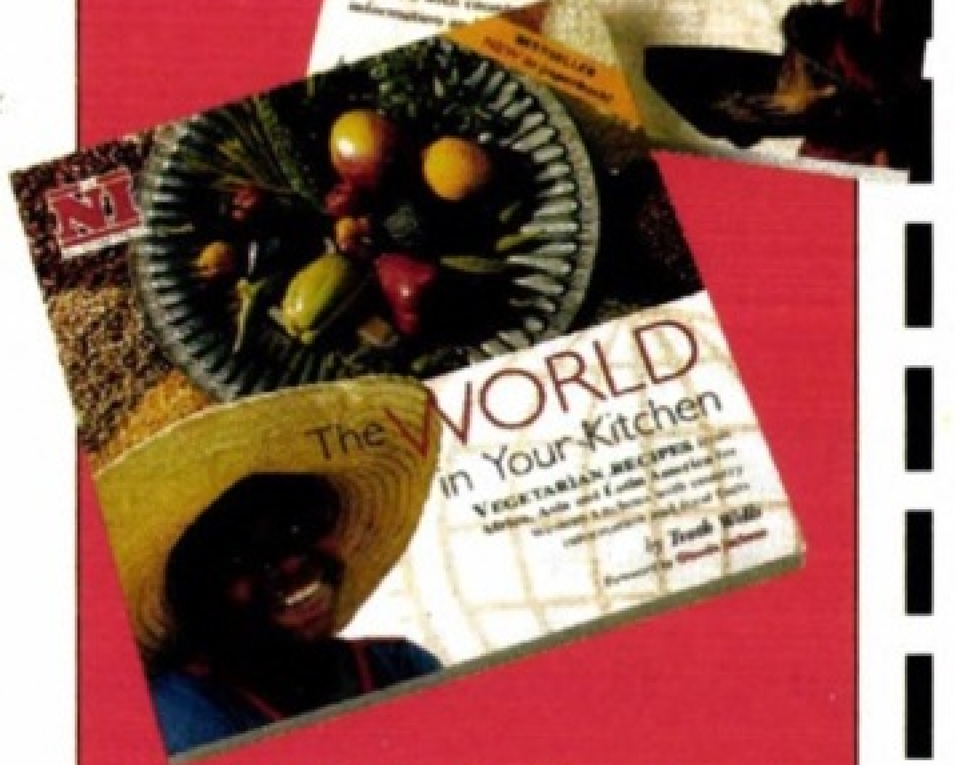

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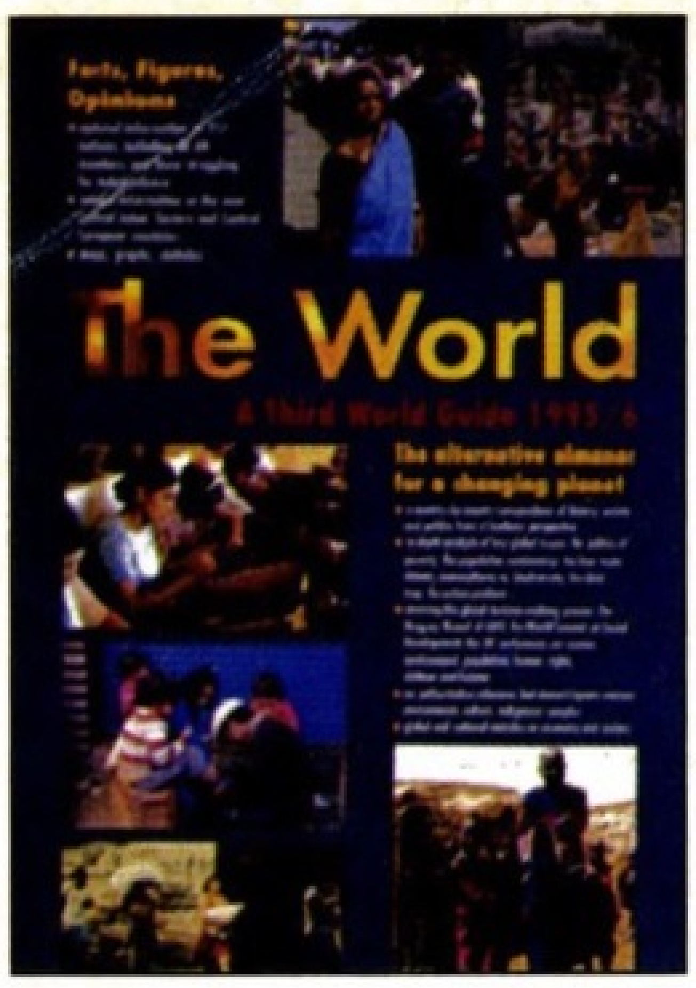
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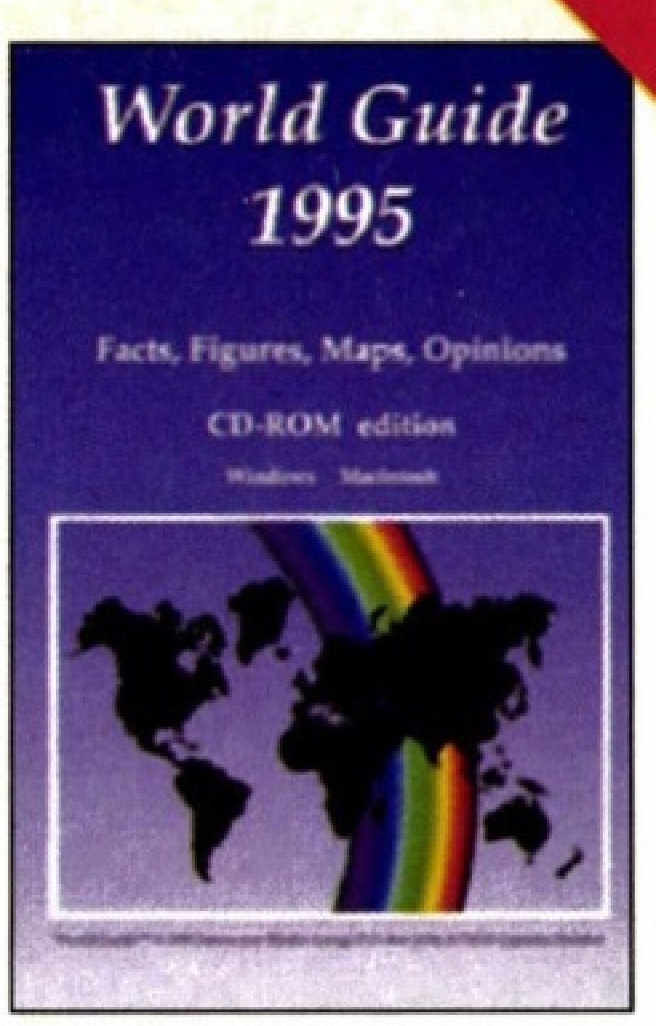

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